

The Last of the Mohicans

By

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Chapter 29

The assembly seated, rising o'er the rest, Achilles thus the king of men addressed.

—Pope's *Illiad*

Cora stood foremost among the prisoners, entwining her arms in those of Alice, in the tenderness of sisterly love. Notwithstanding the fearful and menacing array of savages on every side of her, no apprehension on her own account could prevent the nobler-minded maiden from keeping her eyes fastened on the pale and anxious features of the trembling Alice. Close at their side stood Heyward, with an interest in both, that, at such a moment of intense uncertainty, scarcely knew a preponderance in favor of her whom he most loved. Hawkeye had placed himself a little in the rear, with a deference to the superior rank of his companions, that no similarity in the state of their present fortunes could induce him to forget. Uncas was not there.

When perfect silence was again restored, and after the usual long, impressive pause, one of the two aged chiefs who sat at the side of the patriarch arose, and demanded aloud, in very intelligible English:

“Which of my prisoners is La Longue Carabine?”

Neither Duncan nor the scout answered. The former, however, glanced his eyes around the dark and silent assembly, and recoiled a pace, when

they fell on the malignant visage of Magua. He saw, at once, that this wily savage had some secret agency in their present arraignment before the nation, and determined to throw every possible impediment in the way of the execution of his sinister plans. He had witnessed one instance of the summary punishments of the Indians, and now dreaded that his companion was to be selected for a second. In this dilemma, with little or no time for reflection, he suddenly determined to cloak his invaluable friend, at any or every hazard to himself. Before he had time, however, to speak, the question was repeated in a louder voice, and with a clearer utterance.

“Give us arms,” the young man haughtily replied, “and place us in yonder woods. Our deeds shall speak for us!”

“This is the warrior whose name has filled our ears!” returned the chief, regarding Heyward with that sort of curious interest which seems inseparable from man, when first beholding one of his fellows to whom merit or accident, virtue or crime, has given notoriety. “What has brought the white man into the camp of the Delawares?”

“My necessities. I come for food, shelter, and friends.”

“It cannot be. The woods are full of game. The head of a warrior needs no other shelter than a sky without clouds; and the Delawares are the enemies, and not the friends of the Yengeese. Go, the mouth has spoken, while the heart said nothing.”

Duncan, a little at a loss in what manner to proceed, remained silent; but the scout, who had listened attentively to all that passed, now advanced steadily to the front.

“That I did not answer to the call for La Longue Carabine, was not owing either to shame or fear,” he said, “for neither one nor the other is the gift of an honest man. But I do not admit the right of the Mingoes to

bestow a name on one whose friends have been mindful of his gifts, in this particular; especially as their title is a lie, 'killdeer' being a grooved barrel and no carabine. I am the man, however, that got the name of Nathaniel from my kin; the compliment of Hawkeye from the Delawares, who live on their own river; and whom the Iroquois have presumed to style the 'Long Rifle', without any warranty from him who is most concerned in the matter."

The eyes of all present, which had hitherto been gravely scanning the person of Duncan, were now turned, on the instant, toward the upright iron frame of this new pretender to the distinguished appellation. It was in no degree remarkable that there should be found two who were willing to claim so great an honor, for impostors, though rare, were not unknown among the natives; but it was altogether material to the just and severe intentions of the Delawares, that there should be no mistake in the matter. Some of their old men consulted together in private, and then, as it would seem, they determined to interrogate their visitor on the subject.

"My brother has said that a snake crept into my camp," said the chief to Magua; "which is he?"

The Huron pointed to the scout.

"Will a wise Delaware believe the barking of a wolf?" exclaimed Duncan, still more confirmed in the evil intentions of his ancient enemy: "a dog never lies, but when was a wolf known to speak the truth?"

The eyes of Magua flashed fire; but suddenly recollecting the necessity of maintaining his presence of mind, he turned away in silent disdain, well assured that the sagacity of the Indians would not fail to extract the real merits of the point in controversy. He was not deceived; for, after another short consultation, the wary Delaware turned to him again, and

expressed the determination of the chiefs, though in the most considerate language.

“My brother has been called a liar,” he said, “and his friends are angry. They will show that he has spoken the truth. Give my prisoners guns, and let them prove which is the man.”

Magua affected to consider the expedient, which he well knew proceeded from distrust of himself, as a compliment, and made a gesture of acquiescence, well content that his veracity should be supported by so skillful a marksman as the scout. The weapons were instantly placed in the hands of the friendly opponents, and they were bid to fire, over the heads of the seated multitude, at an earthen vessel, which lay, by accident, on a stump, some fifty yards from the place where they stood.

Heyward smiled to himself at the idea of a competition with the scout, though he determined to persevere in the deception, until apprised of the real designs of Magua.

Raising his rifle with the utmost care, and renewing his aim three several times, he fired. The bullet cut the wood within a few inches of the vessel; and a general exclamation of satisfaction announced that the shot was considered a proof of great skill in the use of a weapon. Even Hawkeye nodded his head, as if he would say, it was better than he expected. But, instead of manifesting an intention to contend with the successful marksman, he stood leaning on his rifle for more than a minute, like a man who was completely buried in thought. From this reverie, he was, however, awakened by one of the young Indians who had furnished the arms, and who now touched his shoulder, saying in exceedingly broken English:

“Can the pale face beat it?”

“Yes, Huron!” exclaimed the scout, raising the short rifle in his right hand, and shaking it at Magua, with as much apparent ease as if it were a reed; “yes, Huron, I could strike you now, and no power on earth could prevent the deed! The soaring hawk is not more certain of the dove than I am this moment of you, did I choose to send a bullet to your heart! Why should I not? Why!—because the gifts of my color forbid it, and I might draw down evil on tender and innocent heads. If you know such a being as God, thank Him, therefore, in your inward soul; for you have reason!”

The flushed countenance, angry eye and swelling figure of the scout, produced a sensation of secret awe in all that heard him. The Delawares held their breath in expectation; but Magua himself, even while he distrusted the forbearance of his enemy, remained immovable and calm, where he stood wedged in by the crowd, as one who grew to the spot.

“Beat it,” repeated the young Delaware at the elbow of the scout.

“Beat what, fool!—what?” exclaimed Hawkeye, still flourishing the weapon angrily above his head, though his eye no longer sought the person of Magua.

“If the white man is the warrior he pretends,” said the aged chief, “let him strike nigher to the mark.”

The scout laughed aloud—a noise that produced the startling effect of an unnatural sound on Heyward; then dropping the piece, heavily, into his extended left hand, it was discharged, apparently by the shock, driving the fragments of the vessel into the air, and scattering them on every side. Almost at the same instant, the rattling sound of the rifle was heard, as he suffered it to fall, contemptuously, to the earth.

The first impression of so strange a scene was engrossing admiration. Then a low, but increasing murmur, ran through the multitude, and finally swelled into sounds that denoted a lively opposition in the sentiments of the spectators. While some openly testified their satisfaction at so unexampled dexterity, by far the larger portion of the tribe were inclined to believe the success of the shot was the result of accident. Heyward was not slow to confirm an opinion that was so favorable to his own pretensions.

“It was chance!” he exclaimed; “none can shoot without an aim!”

“Chance!” echoed the excited woodsman, who was now stubbornly bent on maintaining his identity at every hazard, and on whom the secret hints of Heyward to acquiesce in the deception were entirely lost. “Does yonder lying Huron, too, think it chance? Give him another gun, and place us face to face, without cover or dodge, and let Providence, and our own eyes, decide the matter between us! I do not make the offer, to you, major; for our blood is of a color, and we serve the same master.”

“That the Huron is a liar, is very evident,” returned Heyward, coolly; “you have yourself heard him assert you to be La Longue Carabine.”

It were impossible to say what violent assertion the stubborn Hawkeye would have next made, in his headlong wish to vindicate his identity, had not the aged Delaware once more interposed.

“The hawk which comes from the clouds can return when he will,” he said; “give them the guns.”

This time the scout seized the rifle with avidity; nor had Magua, though he watched the movements of the marksman with jealous eyes, any further cause for apprehension.

“Now let it be proved, in the face of this tribe of Delawares, which is the better man,” cried the scout, tapping the butt of his piece with that finger which had pulled so many fatal triggers.

“You see that gourd hanging against yonder tree, major; if you are a marksman fit for the borders, let me see you break its shell!”

Duncan noted the object, and prepared himself to renew the trial. The gourd was one of the usual little vessels used by the Indians, and it was suspended from a dead branch of a small pine, by a thong of deerskin, at the full distance of a hundred yards. So strangely compounded is the feeling of self-love, that the young soldier, while he knew the utter worthlessness of the suffrages of his savage umpires, forgot the sudden motives of the contest in a wish to excel. It had been seen, already, that his skill was far from being contemptible, and he now resolved to put forth its nicest qualities. Had his life depended on the issue, the aim of Duncan could not have been more deliberate or guarded. He fired; and three or four young Indians, who sprang forward at the report, announced with a shout, that the ball was in the tree, a very little on one side of the proper object. The warriors uttered a common ejaculation of pleasure, and then turned their eyes, inquiringly, on the movements of his rival.

“It may do for the Royal Americans!” said Hawkeye, laughing once more in his own silent, heartfelt manner; “but had my gun often turned so much from the true line, many a marten, whose skin is now in a lady’s muff, would still be in the woods; ay, and many a bloody Mingo, who has departed to his final account, would be acting his deviltries at this very day, atween the provinces. I hope the squaw who owns the gourd has more of them in her wigwam, for this will never hold water again!”

The scout had shook his priming, and cocked his piece, while speaking; and, as he ended, he threw back a foot, and slowly raised the muzzle from the earth: the motion was steady, uniform, and in one direction.

When on a perfect level, it remained for a single moment, without tremor or variation, as though both man and rifle were carved in stone. During that stationary instant, it poured forth its contents, in a bright, glancing sheet of flame. Again the young Indians bounded forward; but their hurried search and disappointed looks announced that no traces of the bullet were to be seen.

“Go!” said the old chief to the scout, in a tone of strong disgust; “thou art a wolf in the skin of a dog. I will talk to the ‘Long Rifle’ of the Yengeese.”

“Ah! had I that piece which furnished the name you use, I would obligate myself to cut the thong, and drop the gourd without breaking it!” returned Hawkeye, perfectly undisturbed by the other’s manner. “Fools, if you would find the bullet of a sharpshooter in these woods, you must look in the object, and not around it!”

The Indian youths instantly comprehended his meaning—for this time he spoke in the Delaware tongue—and tearing the gourd from the tree, they held it on high with an exulting shout, displaying a hole in its bottom, which had been but by the bullet, after passing through the usual orifice in the center of its upper side. At this unexpected exhibition, a loud and vehement expression of pleasure burst from the mouth of every warrior present. It decided the question, and effectually established Hawkeye in the possession of his dangerous reputation. Those curious and admiring eyes which had been turned again on Heyward, were finally directed to the weather-beaten form of the scout, who immediately became the principal object of attention to the simple and unsophisticated beings by whom he was surrounded. When the sudden and noisy commotion had a little subsided, the aged chief resumed his examination.

“Why did you wish to stop my ears?” he said, addressing Duncan; “are the Delawares fools that they could not know the young panther from the cat?”

“They will yet find the Huron a singing–bird,” said Duncan, endeavoring to adopt the figurative language of the natives.

“It is good. We will know who can shut the ears of men. Brother,” added the chief turning his eyes on Magua, “the Delawares listen.”

Thus singled, and directly called on to declare his object, the Huron arose; and advancing with great deliberation and dignity into the very center of the circle, where he stood confronted by the prisoners, he placed himself in an attitude to speak. Before opening his mouth, however, he bent his eyes slowly along the whole living boundary of earnest faces, as if to temper his expressions to the capacities of his audience. On Hawkeye he cast a glance of respectful enmity; on Duncan, a look of inextinguishable hatred; the shrinking figure of Alice he scarcely deigned to notice; but when his glance met the firm, commanding, and yet lovely form of Cora, his eye lingered a moment, with an expression that it might have been difficult to define. Then, filled with his own dark intentions, he spoke in the language of the Canadas, a tongue that he well knew was comprehended by most of his auditors.

“The Spirit that made men colored them differently,” commenced the subtle Huron. “Some are blacker than the sluggish bear. These He said should be slaves; and He ordered them to work forever, like the beaver. You may hear them groan, when the south wind blows, louder than the lowing buffaloes, along the shores of the great salt lake, where the big canoes come and go with them in droves. Some He made with faces paler than the ermine of the forests; and these He ordered to be traders; dogs to their women, and wolves to their slaves. He gave this people the nature of the pigeon; wings that never tire; young, more plentiful than the leaves on the trees, and appetites to devour the earth. He gave them

tongues like the false call of the wildcat; hearts like rabbits; the cunning of the hog (but none of the fox), and arms longer than the legs of the moose. With his tongue he stops the ears of the Indians; his heart teaches him to pay warriors to fight his battles; his cunning tells him how to get together the goods of the earth; and his arms inclose the land from the shores of the salt-water to the islands of the great lake. His gluttony makes him sick. God gave him enough, and yet he wants all. Such are the pale faces.

“Some the Great Spirit made with skins brighter and redder than yonder sun,” continued Magua, pointing impressively upward to the lurid luminary, which was struggling through the misty atmosphere of the horizon; “and these did He fashion to His own mind. He gave them this island as He had made it, covered with trees, and filled with game. The wind made their clearings; the sun and rain ripened their fruits; and the snows came to tell them to be thankful. What need had they of roads to journey by! They saw through the hills! When the beavers worked, they lay in the shade, and looked on. The winds cooled them in summer; in winter, skins kept them warm. If they fought among themselves, it was to prove that they were men. They were brave; they were just; they were happy.”

Here the speaker paused, and again looked around him to discover if his legend had touched the sympathies of his listeners. He met everywhere, with eyes riveted on his own, heads erect and nostrils expanded, as if each individual present felt himself able and willing, singly, to redress the wrongs of his race.

“If the Great Spirit gave different tongues to his red children,” he continued, in a low, still melancholy voice, “it was that all animals might understand them. Some He placed among the snows, with their cousin, the bear. Some he placed near the setting sun, on the road to the happy hunting grounds. Some on the lands around the great fresh waters; but to

His greatest, and most beloved, He gave the sands of the salt lake. Do my brothers know the name of this favored people?"

"It was the Lenape!" exclaimed twenty eager voices in a breath.

"It was the Lenni Lenape," returned Magua, affecting to bend his head in reverence to their former greatness. "It was the tribes of the Lenape! The sun rose from water that was salt, and set in water that was sweet, and never hid himself from their eyes. But why should I, a Huron of the woods, tell a wise people their own traditions? Why remind them of their injuries; their ancient greatness; their deeds; their glory; their happiness; their losses; their defeats; their misery? Is there not one among them who has seen it all, and who knows it to be true? I have done. My tongue is still for my heart is of lead. I listen."

As the voice of the speaker suddenly ceased, every face and all eyes turned, by a common movement, toward the venerable Tamenund. From the moment that he took his seat, until the present instant, the lips of the patriarch had not severed, and scarcely a sign of life had escaped him. He sat bent in feebleness, and apparently unconscious of the presence he was in, during the whole of that opening scene, in which the skill of the scout had been so clearly established. At the nicely graduated sound of Magua's voice, however, he betrayed some evidence of consciousness, and once or twice he even raised his head, as if to listen. But when the crafty Huron spoke of his nation by name, the eyelids of the old man raised themselves, and he looked out upon the multitude with that sort of dull, unmeaning expression which might be supposed to belong to the countenance of a specter. Then he made an effort to rise, and being upheld by his supporters, he gained his feet, in a posture commanding by its dignity, while he tottered with weakness.

"Who calls upon the children of the Lenape?" he said, in a deep, guttural voice, that was rendered awfully audible by the breathless silence of the multitude; "who speaks of things gone? Does not the egg become a

worm—the worm a fly, and perish? Why tell the Delawares of good that is past? Better thank the Manitou for that which remains.”

“It is a Wyandot,” said Magua, stepping nigher to the rude platform on which the other stood; “a friend of Tamenund.”

“A friend!” repeated the sage, on whose brow a dark frown settled, imparting a portion of that severity which had rendered his eye so terrible in middle age. “Are the Mingoies rulers of the earth? What brings a Huron in here?”

“Justice. His prisoners are with his brothers, and he comes for his own.”

Tamenund turned his head toward one of his supporters, and listened to the short explanation the man gave.

Then, facing the applicant, he regarded him a moment with deep attention; after which he said, in a low and reluctant voice:

“Justice is the law of the great Manitou. My children, give the stranger food. Then, Huron, take thine own and depart.”

On the delivery of this solemn judgment, the patriarch seated himself, and closed his eyes again, as if better pleased with the images of his own ripened experience than with the visible objects of the world. Against such a decree there was no Delaware sufficiently hardy to murmur, much less oppose himself. The words were barely uttered when four or five of the younger warriors, stepping behind Heyward and the scout, passed thongs so dexterously and rapidly around their arms, as to hold them both in instant bondage. The former was too much engrossed with his precious and nearly insensible burden, to be aware of their intentions before they were executed; and the latter, who considered even the hostile tribes of the Delawares a superior race of beings, submitted without resistance. Perhaps, however, the manner of the scout would not

have been so passive, had he fully comprehended the language in which the preceding dialogue had been conducted.

Magua cast a look of triumph around the whole assembly before he proceeded to the execution of his purpose. Perceiving that the men were unable to offer any resistance, he turned his looks on her he valued most. Cora met his gaze with an eye so calm and firm, that his resolution wavered. Then, recollecting his former artifice, he raised Alice from the arms of the warrior against whom she leaned, and beckoning Heyward to follow, he motioned for the encircling crowd to open. But Cora, instead of obeying the impulse he had expected, rushed to the feet of the patriarch, and, raising her voice, exclaimed aloud:

“Just and venerable Delaware, on thy wisdom and power we lean for mercy! Be deaf to yonder artful and remorseless monster, who poisons thy ears with falsehoods to feed his thirst for blood. Thou that hast lived long, and that hast seen the evil of the world, should know how to temper its calamities to the miserable.”

The eyes of the old man opened heavily, and he once more looked upward at the multitude. As the piercing tones of the suppliant swelled on his ears, they moved slowly in the direction of her person, and finally settled there in a steady gaze. Cora had cast herself to her knees; and, with hands clenched in each other and pressed upon her bosom, she remained like a beauteous and breathing model of her sex, looking up in his faded but majestic countenance, with a species of holy reverence. Gradually the expression of Tamenund’s features changed, and losing their vacancy in admiration, they lighted with a portion of that intelligence which a century before had been wont to communicate his youthful fire to the extensive bands of the Delawares. Rising without assistance, and seemingly without an effort, he demanded, in a voice that startled its auditors by its firmness:

“What art thou?”

“A woman. One of a hated race, it thou wilt—a Yengee. But one who has never harmed thee, and who cannot harm thy people, if she would; who asks for succor.”

“Tell me, my children,” continued the patriarch, hoarsely, motioning to those around him, though his eyes still dwelt upon the kneeling form of Cora, “where have the Delawares camped?”

“In the mountains of the Iroquois, beyond the clear springs of the Horican.”

“Many parching summers are come and gone,” continued the sage, “since I drank of the water of my own rivers. The children of Minquon are the justest white men, but they were thirsty and they took it to themselves. Do they follow us so far?”

William Penn was termed Minquon by the Delawares, and, as he never used violence or injustice in his dealings with them, his reputation for probity passed into a proverb. The American is justly proud of the origin of his nation, which is perhaps unequaled in the history of the world; but the Pennsylvanian and Jerseyman have more reason to value themselves in their ancestors than the natives of any other state, since no wrong was done the original owners of the soil.

“We follow none, we covet nothing,” answered Cora. “Captives against our wills, have we been brought amongst you; and we ask but permission to depart to our own in peace. Art thou not Tamenund—the father, the judge, I had almost said, the prophet—of this people?”

“I am Tamenund of many days.”

”’Tis now some seven years that one of thy people was at the mercy of a white chief on the borders of this province. He claimed to be of the

blood of the good and just Tamenund. ‘Go’, said the white man, ‘for thy parent’s sake thou art free’ Dost thou remember the name of that English warrior?”

“I remember, that when a laughing boy,” returned the patriarch, with the peculiar recollection of vast age, “I stood upon the sands of the sea shore, and saw a big canoe, with wings whiter than the swan’s, and wider than many eagles, come from the rising sun.”

“Nay, nay; I speak not of a time so very distant, but of favor shown to thy kindred by one of mine, within the memory of thy youngest warrior.”

“Was it when the Yengeese and the Dutchmanne fought for the hunting-grounds of the Delawares? Then Tamenund was a chief, and first laid aside the bow for the lightning of the pale faces—”

“Not yet then,” interrupted Cora, “by many ages; I speak of a thing of yesterday. Surely, surely, you forget it not.”

“It was but yesterday,” rejoined the aged man, with touching pathos, “that the children of the Lenape were masters of the world. The fishes of the salt lake, the birds, the beasts, and the Mengee of the woods, owned them for Sagamores.”

Cora bowed her head in disappointment, and, for a bitter moment struggled with her chagrin. Then, elevating her rich features and beaming eyes, she continued, in tones scarcely less penetrating than the unearthly voice of the patriarch himself:

“Tell me, is Tamenund a father?”

The old man looked down upon her from his elevated stand, with a benignant smile on his wasted countenance, and then casting his eyes slowly over the whole assemblage, he answered:

“Of a nation.”

“For myself I ask nothing. Like thee and thine, venerable chief,” she continued, pressing her hands convulsively on her heart, and suffering her head to droop until her burning cheeks were nearly concealed in the maze of dark, glossy tresses that fell in disorder upon her shoulders, “the curse of my ancestors has fallen heavily on their child. But yonder is one who has never known the weight of Heaven’s displeasure until now. She is the daughter of an old and failing man, whose days are near their close. She has many, very many, to love her, and delight in her; and she is too good, much too precious, to become the victim of that villain.”

“I know that the pale faces are a proud and hungry race. I know that they claim not only to have the earth, but that the meanest of their color is better than the Sachems of the red man. The dogs and crows of their tribes,” continued the earnest old chieftain, without heeding the wounded spirit of his listener, whose head was nearly crushed to the earth in shame, as he proceeded, “would bark and caw before they would take a woman to their wigwams whose blood was not of the color of snow. But let them not boast before the face of the Manitou too loud. They entered the land at the rising, and may yet go off at the setting sun. I have often seen the locusts strip the leaves from the trees, but the season of blossoms has always come again.”

“It is so,” said Cora, drawing a long breath, as if reviving from a trance, raising her face, and shaking back her shining veil, with a kindling eye, that contradicted the death-like paleness of her countenance; “but why—it is not permitted us to inquire. There is yet one of thine own people who has not been brought before thee; before thou lettest the Huron depart in triumph, hear him speak.”

Observing Tamenund to look about him doubtingly, one of his companions said:

“It is a snake—a red-skin in the pay of the Yengeese. We keep him for the torture.”

“Let him come,” returned the sage.

Then Tamenund once more sank into his seat, and a silence so deep prevailed while the young man prepared to obey his simple mandate, that the leaves, which fluttered in the draught of the light morning air, were distinctly heard rustling in the surrounding forest.