

The Last of the Mohicans

By James Fennimore Cooper

It is a strange truth of the French-English war of North America that the dangers of the natural world had to be defeated before any fighting could be done between the two countries. The land of the Americas was covered in mountains, lakes and the deepest of forests. It is perhaps one of the ironies of history that although the French and British fought over for three years to rule the New World, neither nation would ultimately possess this young world.

The story of the war begins in 1757, as the French army fought the British army for control of the North American continent. America was a wild country and the thick woods were dangerous. Indians fought other Indians. Indians fought white men. White men fought white men. The French fought the British because both nations wanted the North American Continent for themselves. As a consequence of the truth that all men of all nations fought, this bloody conflict came to be known as the French and Indian War.

The French and Indian War was a colonial extension of the Seven Years War that ravaged Europe from 1756 to 1763. It was the bloodiest American war in the 18th century. It took more lives than the American Revolution, and involved people on three continents. The war was the product of a great imperial struggle, a clash between the French and English over colonial territory and wealth. Within these global forces, the war was also a product of the local rivalry between British and French colonists.

After a year and a half of undeclared war, the French and the English formally declared war in May 1756. For the first three years of the war, the outnumbered French dominated the battlefield, soundly defeating the English in battles at Fort Oswego and Ticonderoga. But the most notorious battle of the war was the French victory at Fort William Henry, the subject of our story. The battle ended in a massacre of British soldiers by Indians allied with the French.

The Indians and the British colonial settlers took sides in this struggle. While the Huron Indians fought alongside the French, the Mohawks and Mohicans fought alongside the British. The settlers who took part in this war were the men, the women, and the children from England who lived now in America. They still regarded themselves as Englishmen, but they felt more and estranged from their British rulers, for these rulers asked them to fight as Englishmen without having the rights and the representation of the English people at home in Britain. With these players, this struggle for the continent took place along the Hudson River as it flowed from the north in Canada, south toward New York.

The British Colonel Munro and his men were at Fort William Henry, along the Hudson. His enemy, the French general Marquis de Montcalm, led his troops toward that British fort, where their superior numbers would surely overwhelm the British. Colonel Munro knew he couldn't

fight Montcalm without more men, so he sent urgent messages to British General Webb, in the north of the country, pleading for help. Webb promised to send 5,000 men from Fort Edward. Colonel Munro waited for them, and waited. But the help did not come.

He also waited for his daughters. Colonel Munro's daughters, Cora and Alice, arrived at Albany New York from England. They had come to be with their father at Fort William Henry.

General Webb's representative at Albany, who took it as a duty to deliver the girls safely though a hostile country, told the officer in charge, Major Duncan Heyward, "Take the girls to their father. But don't follow the regular soldiers — it's too dangerous. Take a secret route. This Indian — he goes by the name of Magua — will show you the way. I'll provide you with a detachment of, say, twenty men, just to secure your safety and that of the girls."

Duncan Heywood, the British officer, was happy to take on what at any other time would be a tedious responsibility. These girls were a matter of special interest to Heywood. He knew them. The younger of the sisters, Alice, was blonde, fair, and beautiful, like a niece to Heywood. The other young woman, Cora, was also beautiful, but had black hair and was perhaps five years older. It was she who made Heywood take special interest. This Cora had long known Heywood as a friend in England, and he loved her. But such affections are not always mutual. For Cora's part, she had a real affinity for the man; but she could not find it within herself to love him as a man or a husband. Still, Heywood had a man's stubborn conviction that Cora could love him and only him — with time. Like an officer and a gentleman of his time and place, he took it for granted that Cora would someday be his wife. She was to disappoint him.

The small group set out, trekking across the forested pathways of the wilderness between the city of Albany, New York and the Canadian frontier. Heywood was in charge of the soldiers, the girls, and the scouts, but Magua led the way — always silent and brooding. While the Indian was walking ahead, Cora, always a strong and assertive girl, asked Duncan about their scowling guide. "What makes you sure that this Indian will do as he says? His hostility is evident in his stone face and his uncommunicative manner."

"Cora, this is not for a woman to care about," answered Heywood, in surprise at her boldness.

"Don't talk down to me, Duncan. I have a power of judgement, and I don't like him; something is wrong in his behavior. I repeat. Can we trust him?"

"Cora dear, I would not let any man guide us whom I do not know. I met him as a trusted guide who has done good service to the British forces here along the Hudson. True, he once had some trouble with your father, a matter concerning his leadership during an Indian attack, but he was punished for that, and, like all of these red men, he has learned his place. He knows how to follow the white man's lead, and he does as he is told."

"If he has been my father's enemy, I would like to know by what miracle *punishing* him would make him any less an enemy. I like him even less for the story you tell me of his being tamed," insisted Cora. "He doesn't look like a man who is in any degree tamed. He does not resemble a man who follows *anyone's* lead but his own."

“Should we distrust a man because his skin is darker than ours?” asked Alice coldly, and the conversation stopped for a moment.

Regaining his thoughts, Duncan said, “In any event,” we are in no position to follow anyone’s lead except his, for only he knows the way to your father. So let us proceed.”

And then came some sounds, some rustling of leaves. Magua said something to Heywood. Duncan Heywood immediately urged all to stop talking: “Magua warns us to silence. Though we are not in danger, our guide suggests that we should avoid attention while on these paths,” Duncan told them. “And noise brings attention, ladies.”

And so their journey continued in silence. Still, the whites were, as always, dull to the ways of the deep forest. None noticed when a Huron Indian face briefly looked out from behind a tree.

Two

Later in the day, and only a few miles to the west, we can find two men standing together by a small river. One of the men was an Indian while the other, though dark from the burning of the sun, was a white man. One carried the tomahawk of a native; the other had a long hunting rifle. The native wore the leather of his tribe; the white man dressed the same – except that he wore a green hunting shirt. The Indian was a famous warrior; the white man was known as the greatest marksman in North America. They called each other by their Indian names, Chingachgook and Hawkeye, and they spoke in the Indian language.

The Indian was telling Hawkeye about the history of his people.

“The first whitefaces were Dutch. In those times we, the Mohicans and Delawares, were a happy people. The lakes gave us fish; the woods gave us animals, and the air provided us with its birds. We took wives who gave us children, and we lived free. Then the Dutch came and gave my people firewater, a poison to our race, and we drank until the heaven and earth seemed to meet in confusion. Then the French came, and then the British. Their gift was always that poison that red men want so much. The red men gave away their land in exchange for that poison. With time, my family died out — departed to the next world. I have only this son, your friend Uncas. And when my son Uncas follows me to that land of the Great Spirit, there will be no more of us, for my son is the last of the Mohicans.

“And now the white man fights the white man. What should we, the doomed red men do as these whites ask us to take sides?”

“Do as I do,” replied Hawkeye. “Follow no man as a servant. Follow no race as a slave. Since the Huron Indians killed my family, and the English failed to do anything in their defense, I have resolved to follow my own way - and yours, my adopted father.”

“You are young, Hawkeye. The day will come when you’ll see that no man can escape his family; no man can escape his race; no man can escape his fate.”

Hawkeye only smiled a grim smile, and then turned toward the woods.

The brush rustled just a bit. In the next instant a youthful warrior stepped between them with the silence only red men can achieve. “Uncas is here!” the arrival said. “I have news.”

Hawkeye greeted his adopted brother with the handshake of their people.

And then the father spoke. “Son, do the Huron enemies walk in these woods?” Chingachgook asked.

“I have been following them,” replied Uncas. “They number two times the fingers on my two hands.”

The older Indian said nothing, but bent down and put his ear to the ground.

“I hear the sound of feet!” said Hawkeye.

“No. The horses of white men,” said Chingachgook. “Hawkeye, they are your brothers; speak to them.”

“I will. But I can’t guarantee that they’ll listen to me.”

In a few moments, a man on a horse rode into the small clearing. Hawkeye and the rider quickly spoke to each other. “Who comes?” asked Hawkeye.

“An officer of the king,” the man said. “Do you know the distance to Fort William?”

“You must be lost,” replied Hawkeye. “It is many miles. I suggest you go to Fort Edward.”

“But that is where we started our journey this morning. We trusted our Indian guide to lead us the way.”

“An Indian lost in the woods!” Said Hawkeye. “Very strange. Is this man a Delaware?”

“No, I think he is a Mohican. But he has worked for us English before, and we trust his obedience.”

“He is not a Mohican. We would know him if he were. So it’s a lie, and a lie like that comes in general from a Huron! I don’t know ... I would only trust a ... we should try to take this Indian prisoner. Speak to your officer – you Major Heywood – when you return. And speak quietly. Tell this Heywood to watch out for his guide. Tell him that we are on our way and we’ll be watching from the forest. Later, we’ll take you to a safe place for the night. And after that, we’ll take you to the fort.”

“When shall I tell Major Heywood you’ll come to us?” asked the scout.

“We three will take look about the forest here, to see what’s happening. Just assure Heywood that we are on our way. And do it quietly.

“Very well, said the scout.” He rode into the forest and disappeared.

Likewise did Hawkeye, Chingachgook, and Uncas. They melted into the woods as only red men can, alert to the challenge and the danger before them.

About two miles distant, Major Duncan Heywood, Cora and Alice Munro, and twenty armed redcoats were plodding along a heavily wooded trail, led by the grim Magua. Heywood took the news of Hawkeye’s presence from his scout, and decided to rest in anticipation of his arrival.

“I see the ladies are tired. Let’s rest a moment, Magua” said Heywood.

“No. We rest ahead two mile.”

“I said we rest now,” countered a now irritated Heywood.

“The whitefaces are slaves to their women,” mumbled Magua in his own language.

“What does Magua say?” asked Duncan suspiciously.

“Magua know English.”

Heywood shook his head, giving up all hope of understanding the red man. And so he returned to the business at hand. “It will soon be night, Magua, and we are no closer Fort William than when we started. Luckily one of my scouts has met a hunter who can lead us to a safe place to stay the night.”

“Then I will go into the forest, and the whitefaces can be together.”

“No, Magua, are we not friends? Stop and eat with us.”

“Magua doesn’t eat,” he told Heywood.

“Then do as you wish,” said Heywood in disgust.

Magua walked ahead, but then stopped when he heard quiet rustling sounds from the forest near him. *He* knew what was coming. And come it did. As the soldiers, broke ranks to sit down and eat, an avalanche of Huron warriors descended on the men. Magua turned in an instant and slashed at the whites he had supposedly been serving. White men fell at the lightening slash of Magua’s tomahawk. Then the red men were upon them. These were his Huron men attacking. Many shot from the bushes. Others sprang onto unprepared Britons, stabbing, cutting, and hacking. It was a rout.

Shocked by the attack, Alice stood frozen, within the aim of any attacker. Cora jumped on her sister — pushing her to the ground, covering her body, breathing comforts. Duncan Heywood leaped to protect the girls from an onslaught of Hurons. Slamming one, stabbing another, he stood his ground between the girls and the onrush. But the Indians outnumbered him. Looking into the barrel of a Huron musket, Heywood braced himself to take the blast — and then another avalanche of men came in! This time it was Hawkeye, Uncas, and Chingachgook who exploded from the forest as one onrush - shooting, stabbing, and killing one Huron after another. Stunned,

the defeated Indians ran into the forest, terrified and confused by the hurricane of violence unleashed by the Mohican trio.

Heywood pulled a musket to shoot a retreating Huron, but failed to see that it was his savior — Chingachgook — at which he took aim. Hawkeye pushed his weapon to the ground and sneered, “I gotta stop you from shooting - just in case your aim is better than your judgement. That man is no Huron; he just rescued you.”

Heywood staggered in stunned silence.

Meanwhile, who had just been saved from a shot in the back by his adopted son, was free to pursue the enemy. He hurled his tomahawk into the back of a fleeing Huron. The dead Huron’s lay massed around Heywood, Hawkeye, and the stunned girls. The victory seemed complete.

But no one of this group was able to get the better of the ever vigilant Magua, who instantly and silently disappeared into the depths of the forest. Catching the man’s retreat from the corner of his eye, Hawkeye swung around and fired his rifle, but the shot was lost among the density of the forest wood. It was one of the few times Hawkeye ever missed a shot.

At that, the Mohicans sprang after the retreating Huron. Duncan Heywood confusedly turned to look to the girls — who were shocked but unhurt — and lost the chance to follow the three Mohican men as they leapt into the forest in their hunt for Magua. He ran after them clumsily, but didn’t get more than a hundred yards when he saw the three men returning through the brush.

“Why have you given up? It was three to one,” Heywood asked.

“Not three to one! It would be stupid to follow too far,” said Hawkeye. “All he would have done is take us to the tomahawks of his comrades deeper in the forest; then all of us would have been killed. Let us save our own skins.”

“What is to be done? Don’t leave us here for God’s sake! The women!” Heywood cried.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take you to safety, but first you must promise two things.”

“Name them.”

“First, you got to be as quiet as mice in these sleeping woods. Red men hear what white men are deaf to. Secondly, you have to do exactly what we say despite that fine red officer’s suit you’re wearing. Think you can do that, Mr. British officer?”

“I will do everything I can to keep this promise,” said Heywood, almost laughing, and more than thankful that he had a new guide.

“Then let’s go. The first thing we got to do is hide the horses, or the Indians will find us easily.”

Then Hawkeye spoke in the Mohican language to Chingachgook: “Hide the animals, and we’ll meet by the river.”

Without speaking, Chingachgook and Uncas led the horses away, and Heywood, Alice, and Cora followed Hawkeye along a dark and winding forest path. After a while they came to a valley with a wide and fast river running through it.

“I can sleep in peace,” whispered Cora to Duncan, “with such fearless and competent men guarding us.”

“They certainly look like good men, but it’s easy to look friendly. Let us hope that that is what they are, unlike Magua.”

No more needed to be said. They followed silently.

Three

The little group followed a path along the river and then they took canoes and paddled to a large group of rocks in the middle of the river, where Hawkeye planned to spend the night. Thick and heavy blankets covered the entrance of a small cave from view. Hawkeye lit a fire, and the group ate wild deer. In the middle of this meal there came a cry from the forest. It sounded neither human nor like that of any animal.

“What was it?” whispered Cora.

Neither Hawkeye nor the Indians replied.

“Are our enemies trying to frighten us?” asked Cora.

“We are hidden in this cave. No light or sound can escape here,” replied Hawkeye.

The same strong, horrid cry was heard again; so the men decided to go outside to investigate.

“Don’t leave us,” said Alice.

“You will be safe here, and we will return as soon as possible,” replied Duncan.

As they left, Cora asked Hawkeye, “Are we in danger?”

“Only the ones who make strange noises in the dark know the answer.”

They were standing outside when the noise was heard again, and it echoed through the valley.

“That sound belongs to no animal I’ve ever heard,” said Hawkeye.

“I know it well,” said Duncan. “It is the scream of a horse in great pain.”

“So we have some visitors,” said Hawkeye. They are either wolves, horse, or perhaps the Huron.”

The men went back inside and told the others the new information. For some time, everything remained quiet, and some of the travelers were able to sleep.

It was still dark when Hawkeye woke up Duncan.

“We must leave.”

“Alice! Cora! Wake up!” Duncan said to the sisters.

They proceeded along the forest paths for some hours until they reached a break in the forest. I have friends who live in the clearing ahead,” said Hawkeye. “Let’s approach carefully.”

As they approached the little cabin where Hawkeye’s friends made their homestead, the smell of fire wafted through the air. Coming closer, they saw the bodies, lying scattered on the ground, hacked by countless hatchet blows.

“Looking long at his dead friends, Hawkeye revealed little emotion. We go now,” he said, turning to lead the group into the forest.

“What,” shouted Cora, “and deny these poor people a Christian burial?”

“A Christian burial, as you call it, would tell the Huron Indians that we had been here. It would be easy to follow us then, and hunt us down in the night.”

This silenced Cora, who was beginning to understand the substance of this Hawkeye, and his singular knowledge of this wild land and the creatures who inhabit it. On they went. But Cora now beheld Hawkeye with new eyes and perhaps a new heart.

Early the next morning, before daylight, they saw the fort from the top a nearby hill. To their horror, the fort was surrounded by ten thousand of Montcalm’s soldiers. The French general had arrived with his huge army and now getting into the fort would be almost impossible. As they neared the walls, the sound of exploding canon fire reached their ears. The fort was under siege by an army equipped with flares, rockets, muskets, and canons.

The group stood on top of the hill, looking down at the French camp.

“We are a few hours too late. It will soon be daylight,” said Hawkeye.

“Is there no way we can get to the fort?” asked Duncan Heywood.

“We have one chance. A fog is coming down fast, and it is possible we may go through the camp unseen.”

They quickly went down the hill and followed a water path which led through the French camp and on to the British fort walls. The fog was incredibly thick, and it was difficult to see further than a few feet. However, Hawkeye knew the water well and was able to get them close before

they were discovered. A cry went up from a French soldier, and the group began to push through the water, the sound of guns coming from behind them.

As they got closer to the camp, the two women heard a familiar voice.

“Wait until you see the enemy! Fire low!”

“It’s Alice! Save your daughters!” cried Alice to her father.

“Don’t fire! God has given me back my children!” shouted Munro, the British officer in charge of the fort.

Munro rushed to meet his daughters and hugged both of them. “Thank the Lord!” he said. Then all of them ran inside to escape the French bombardment. “What on earth are you doing here, girls?” asked Munro.

“We received word from you that you wanted us to come to Fort Henry,” replied Cora.

“What? I sent a very clear message with my Mohican scout, Magua, that you girls were NOT to come to Fort Henry!”

Hawkeye said nothing – he only laughed grimly.

Heywood spoke up: “It turns out that Magua was actually working for the French. He is a Huron, not a Mohican.”

“Oh god! Then that means that my message to General Webb at Fort Edward did not get through. That traitor Magua was entrusted with the message asking Webb to send reinforcements.”

“I’m afraid that you’re right, Colonel Munro,” said Heywood.

“We’ll just have to do the best we can,” concluded Munro. “Take these girls to safety.”

A few days of safety passed, and the travelers rested. The conditions weren’t encouraging for the British soldiers; they could only wait for the British army and its superior numbers to come from Fort Edward to save them from a siege that they had no hope of withstanding. Hawkeye had been sent out to find information about these soldiers, but sadly, when he returned it was to report that the reinforcements from General Webb would not soon be coming.

It was then that the French saw their opportunity to take the fort. The French General Montcalm sent a message to the fort, declaring that he wished to speak to Munro personally to talk about the British giving up. For his part, Colonel Munro had no idea when help would arrive; so he sent Duncan Heywood to speak to the French general.

When they met inside the French camp, Montcalm was more than polite to Duncan. “Your commander is a brave man, but I think you have all been brave enough. Now is the time to give up. I take it as a given that your commander recognizes our superiority of numbers and arms.”

“Do we seem to be so weak to you? We are protected by the fort, and an army of six thousand is only a day or two away from here,” replied Duncan.

“I do not think they will be coming to help you. My men have intercepted a message from your General Webb, and I must inform you that the contents of the letter are not at all encouraging for your people. Be so kind as to inform Colonel Munro that, if he wants to receive this letter, he must come and speak to me personally.”

With that, Duncan returned to the fort to speak with his commander. Duncan told him what the Frenchman had said, and Munro decided that he would go and speak to Montcalm. So he took Duncan and a few soldiers and went out to the French camp. To their surprise, the French soldiers held back as they walked through the assembled troops. When he and Montcalm met, they were silent for a few moments, then the Frenchman spoke.

“Sir, I believe you have done all you can to defend this place. You have earned much honor in your resistance. It takes as much bravery to recognize when you have lost as it does to fight a great battle. I think now is the time for you to give up your fort.”

“Do you know that, when the army from Fort Edward arrives, we will have the forces requisite to overpower you?” Munro asked the Frenchman.

“I’m afraid not, Colonel Munro. The movements from that army will not be harming to me,” he replied. “Look at this letter, just intercepted from one of your couriers.”

The letter was given to Munro with all the courtesy of a wedding invitation. He quickly read it. His face turned from a look of confidence to an expression of shock as he read the letter. When he finished it, it fell from his hands on to the ground. Duncan picked the letter up and read it. It was from Fort Edward, and it said that the general should give up and relinquish the fort; the French army was too numerous to fight under the circumstances.

“The commander of Fort Edward has betrayed me,” said Munro quietly.

“He has not. He implores you to face the reality of a situation that he himself has come to recognize and accept. But sir, before you make any decisions, hear my conditions,” said Montcalm calmly.

“I will hear you. I must, I suppose,” Munro replied.

“It is impossible for you to keep the fort, but in recognition of your valor and the heroism of your soldiery, I will let you keep your weapons and your honor. You may walk from the fort as free men.”

How can a beaten man refuse such an offer? Munro returned to his fort, delivered the awful news to one and all, and those who were living there prepared to leave.

That night in the French camp, almost everyone celebrated what was to be a great and honorable victory for Montcalm, his soldiery, and the nation of France. But not everyone was celebrating. Not Magua. He wanted revenge against his arch enemy Munro, the man who had humiliated him so many years ago. He went to speak to Montcalm with the controlled rage that now marked his unhappy life.

“None of Magua’s warriors have killed. Huron honor comes from the killing that proceeds from a battle victory. Why the Frenchman do not understand this?” Magua demanded.

General Montcalm took on the tone of a schoolmaster as he explained the ways of his people to Magua. “We have made peace with the British, and our victory is complete – without need for any slaughter. Understand this reality, Magua. You are not to attack them. They are friends now – or least allies. Teach your tribe what this means, and show them how peace serves our purposes.”

“White man not understand war; not understand honor; not understand pride. Huron help Frenchman, but get nothing in return. I speak of this to Huron chiefs. We see.”

Alarmed by this threat to an Indian alliance, Montcalm offered Magua a subtle assurance: “If I let the British leave the fort peacefully, I have done my part as a gentleman. I can, of course, offer them no assurances of what might happen in the forest on the way back to Fort Edwards. Do I make myself clear?” asked Montcalm.

Magua understood the hint, but as was his way, he said nothing as he turned and left the room, disappearing into the blackness of the forest.

Four

The next day the British left the fort that had sheltered them for so many months. It now stood a shell – naked trophy to French victors. The soldiers went first; then came the horses and carriages, carrying wounded soldiers, food, drink and equipment. Other wounded men walked slowly and painfully behind these carriages. The French soldiers and officers respectfully watched them as they passed. But there on the sidelines was a mass of Hurons, watching the Englishmen like vultures.

The final group to leave the fort were the women and children, many of them scared and crying. As they passed the Indians, Cora noticed Magua moving quickly among the Indians and speaking to all of them.

One of the Hurons saw a bright piece of clothing he liked, and so he ran up to the owner and stole it. Then another went to the group of women and children. He had seen a scarf he wanted, but it was being used to cover a little baby. The woman screamed in terror when the Indian came close to her, and she wouldn’t give him what he wanted. The sly Indian grabbed the baby from her and then, holding it above his head by its legs, showed that he wanted to exchange it for the scarf.

“Take everything, but give me my baby!” she cried. Indians surrounded her, stealing everything they could. Before the exchange between them could be completed, another Indian had taken the scarf.

The sorry army of men, women, and children continued on their humiliating trek back to Albany. Magua would wait a only a little longer for his moment.

The next day, the army of British trudged along the road back to Albany. The pain and embarrassment of defeat at the hands of the French and downright humiliation at the hands of the Hurons dogged the weary travelers as they made their sullen way back to Fort Edwards. Their deadened hearts quieted the travelers and they wept within themselves, oblivious to the forest surrounds around them. It was perhaps for this reason that no one except Hawkeye and his Mohican brethren noticed the rustling of the brush as a dark force moved in toward the British.

At one explosive moment, an invisible Magua let out a cry, and from the surrounding forest came hundreds of Huron Indians who threw themselves onto the English. A terrible battle ensued, as death pushed in from everywhere, and blood flowed like a river. Some of the Indians even drank the blood from the ground, so great was their thrill at the massacre. The British soldiers who were strong enough to fight, collected into small groups and prepared their muskets for a volley, but it was not enough. Countless soldiers died in the defense, and Colonel Munro at length was killed by Magua himself – thrilled by his bloody revenge.

A clot of Hurons rushed up to Cora and Alice, eager to kill, but they found the older sister’s fearlessness strange and didn’t attack fast enough. Cora fought like wildfire. Magua searched among the crowd for the sisters, determined to wipe out the seed of Munro for all time, and finally saw the girls huddled in a knot. He moved in for the kill. And then Hawkeye was there! He rushed in, swiping Magua’s head with the butt of his rifle, and led the girls into the forest and toward the river. Duncan Heywood, seeing the rescue, ran after them. He was soon accompanied by the figures of Chingcachgook and his son Uncas. The tiny party of survivors raced toward the river, desperate for escape.

Back in the clearing, the Huron victory was almost complete. Magua struggled to his feet, surveyed the wreckage, and let out a victory cry. And then it was over. The massacre complete, all of the sick, the wounded, the women and the children were taken hold by the bloodthirsty savages of the Huron tribe, and taken as prisoners.

But the tiny party of survivors led by Hawkeye and the Mohicans rushed away, free for the moment. “We can escape to waterfall,” Hawkeye told his Indian brother and father. They knew the place. The three Mohicans found an abandoned canoe, boarded the girls and Heywood, cast into the frigid waters, and slipped away. As they rowed away from the fight, the three Mohicans searched for the hidden cave of whose existence only they knew, where, God willing, no one would find them.

On they rowed, flowing with the current, desperate moment after moment until the sounds of pursuing Hurons was no longer to be heard. Reaching shore some hours later, they padded

through the woods beside a great waterfall and came to the opening of a hidden cave. This cavern was situated directly under the falling torrent of the falls, and made an excellent hiding place. The two older men were first to jump into the cave.

“Will they find us?” asked Duncan.

“Sooner or later, I fear. They will be back, like hungry wolves,” replied Hawkeye.

And so they hid, drenched and cold in the dank cave, hoping against hope that none would find them. But found they were. After a short interval, four Hurons were seen swimming toward the cave. A fallen tree in the water gave them protection. A fifth swam to join them, but he was too slow for the rushing water, and in seconds he was carried over the waterfall. For a second there was a terrible scream, and then silence, like a cemetery. Others took a route along the cliff face, looking for the sideways entry into the cave. Inevitably, they found it.

Hawkeye, Chingachgook, Uncas and Heywood waited for the attack. The first two had pistols. The Indians charged, and Hawkeye fired his deadly rifle again. The first of the attackers fell.

“Take the last man, Uncas, for we are certain to kill the other two,” said Hawkeye.

Uncas ran to meet his enemy. The two whites both stood and fired their pistols, but each without success. Hawkeye took out a knife and then wrestled with his opponent for a minute, each holding the other's right-hand. The Indian was the weaker man, and Hawkeye stabbed his knife into the other man's heart before pushing him into the water.

Duncan Heywood's fight was not so easy. He had no knife, so could only try to defend himself with hand and muscle. He and the Huron stood by the side of the river. A long drop into the waterfall and certain death waited for the loser. Duncan felt the other man's fingers around his throat and, for an awful moment, he thought he would die. The Indian smiled, but this turned into a look of surprise when Uncas deeply cut his arm. He was then thrown over the edge into the river, never to return.

“To cover!” shouted Hawkeye, “for our work is only half finished.”

The men hid behind the rocks outside the cave while the Hurons fired bullet after bullet at them.

“I imagine the Huron's won't become tired of this until they get us,” said Hawkeye.

At that moment a shot hit the rocks very close to Duncan's head.

“That shot was closer than any of the others,” he said, turning to Hawkeye. He was surprised to see the soldier's rifle aimed up at the sky. Looking up at where it pointed, he saw an Indian at the top of a tree. Hawkeye took one shot, and the Indian fell to his death.

“That was the last of my gunpowder. Uncas, go to the canoe and get some more!” Hawkeye ordered.

Uncas moved quickly down the rocks to the river, but when he got there he gave a loud shout of panic. Duncan knew immediately that something was wrong and looked down at the river. The canoe was moving slowly down the river away from the rocks.

“All is lost,” said Hawkeye.

Duncan looked at Hawkeye in surprise. “Surely our situation is not so bad,” he said.

“You are young, rich and have friends. At such an age, it’s hard to die,” Hawkeye said. Then he turned to Chingachgook. “We may have fought our last battle together.”

“Let the Huron women cry over their dead men,” replied the Mohican, “because I will not surrender. I will take many Huron warriors with me to the land of the dead.” He loaded his gun as he spoke.

“Their dead are with the slimy fish,” said Uncas. “They fall from the trees like fruit. We will kill more before we die.”

“I can die without a bitter heart,” replied Hawkeye. “But I can’t bear to think of the girls’ fates.

“Why die at all?” asked Cora. “Run to the woods or jump into the river, my brave men. You may leave us to our unhappy fortunes.”

Hawkeye suddenly realized that Cora’s idea was the one realist chance. “You stay alive!” said Hawkeye. They won’t kill you. I’ will go! But I’ll be back. I’ll find you. I swear I’ll find you! Just stay alive!” With that, Hawkeye and the two Mohicans leapt into the waterfall, free of the cave and their Huron pursuers.

A hundred feet they fell – through the raging waters, splashing into the freezing river rapids, careening down the torrent of drowning water fury. But they knew the violent waters of their river world, and they knew how to survive the torrent. They swam with the fury of desperate survivors, and with time they found the shore and dragged themselves to safety. What remained was to follow the Hurons and their captives, finding a way somehow to save the girls.

Cora, Alice, and Duncan were alone now, facing their Huron pursuers and the terrible fate that awaited them. They stood trembling in the cave, their room hidden by blankets over the small entrance. For a time, it seemed the Hurons might not find them, but then one of the blankets was lifted, and a figure with a torch entered the cave. From the look on his face it was obvious that he couldn’t yet see in the dark. But Duncan recognized the face of Magua, and raised one of his pistols to kill his enemy. The Huron’s face changed into a smile as he realized what he had found. He stepped aside from the blast away just in time to avoid Duncan’s shot. The noise echoed through the cave, but the fight was over. Before long the cave was entered by the whole gang of Hurons.

Beating Duncan and tying up the girls, the Hurons - led by Magua - dragged the sad trio toward the Huron encampment, where the elder chief of the tribe would decide whether Magua’s desire to wipe out the children of his tormentor – Munro – was an acceptable punishment according to the laws of his people.

The elder of that tribe of the Huron Indians was known as the Sachem – the old one. It was he to whom Magua must plead to achieve his dream of destruction. And plead he would.

The captives were bound, beaten, and unceremoniously taken to the Delaware tribe, allies of the Hurons. It was a place where their fate would be determined. After hearing the news of Magua's arrival with these prized captives, one of the Delawares went to get their head chief. He was a man who had reached an age few humans ever reach. When he arrived, he was dressed in expensive furs and jewelry. A whisper went from mouth to mouth that "Sachem" had left his wigwam, and all the Indians of the tribe came to watch what would happen.

Magua was the first to speak. "I am a friend to the Delawares and you Sachem. These are my prisoners. They are British and are our enemies."

"A friend! Perhaps. What do you want from me, Huron," replied the ancient chief.

"Justice. I want my prisoners to be punished for their harms to me."

The eyes of the chief moved to Heywood, Cora, and Alice.

"Here me," Magua demanded. "I ask the right to kill the girls, for they are the seed of the man – Munro- who humiliated me and my race."

But the Sachem, or elder of the tribe, held back, suggesting that Magua was too filled with the devils of revenge. "Your bravery is real, Magua," said the Sachem, "but your revenge will anger the Great Spirit. Why do you claim the right to kill these girls?"

Magua gathered his thoughts, and with a grim face told the chief his story. "Magua was born a free chief in the tribe of the Hurons. He saw his first twenty summers and was happy. But then the white men came, and they taught Magua to drink the poison water that makes a man insane. Then one night, when he had drunk this firewater, he went walking in the camp of the white men and walked into the wrong place – a place forbidden by the white chief Munro, father of these girls. Magua was punished.

He took off the fur that covered his chest. "Look at these," he said pointing to many scars. "These are the scars given by the bullets and knives of my enemies. These a warrior can be proud of." Then he turned to show his back. It was covered in the scars of a whip. "But the scars given by the father of these girls are a humiliation. Magua must hide them like a woman under his clothes."

"So you demand the death of these children of the man who hurt you? asked the chief"

"Revenge. If I have the deaths of the white man's daughters, I have his heart," said Magua. "I demand the right to destroy the seed of my enemy – the white man who humiliated me. That Munro - the girls are his seed. They must die so that my pride may be restored."

"Magua," said the Sachem, "it is not you who can so decide in my village among my people"–

But then they were interrupted. They beheld an incredible sight in the distance at the border of their settlement. An unarmed Hawkeye was parading unafraid into the village of his enemies. He was repeatedly beaten down by Huron warriors as he approached, but he stepped forth undeterred.

Reaching the elder, he staggered forth despite the blows from the young warriors who resisted him. "I must speak with the Sachem!" Hawkeye demanded.

"Kill him!" demanded Magua.

"I will speak with the Sachem!" Hawkeye shouted.

"Kill him!" insisted Magua.

But the Sachem spoke. "This man is brave. He has earned my ear. Speak." said the tribal elder.

Hawkeye stepped forward, "I will give you myself instead of the girls.

But the chief did not understand English.

With Duncan translating into French, Hawkeye pleaded with the Sachem to reconsider what Magua had told him. "Magua is just acting out of selfish fulfillment rather than for the good of the tribe," said Hawkeye. "He is filled with the worst devils of revenge. These girls are innocent. Let them go! Anger not the redcoats! "I will give you myself instead of the girls," repeated Hawkeye.

"Kill them all!" demanded Magua. "My pride demands their death."

"No. Here is my decision," said the Sachem: "Burn the girl Cora alive to pay for the loss of Magua's pride. Send this red haired white man back to the British to make them know we do not want to be enemies. We do not want the enmity of the redcoats. I will give the golden haired girl to Magua as a bride so that both their bloodlines can continue. And this Hawkeye - he is to be released as payment for his bravery. I have decided."

Magua accepted this decision, for it gave him revenge *and* a bride who would humiliate the family of his hated enemy, Colonel Munro.

But Hawkeye would not lose his Cora without a fight. He would give his life for her. He shouted against the Sachem's decision, pleading with the chief to allow him to take Cora's place on the burning stake. However, Duncan purposefully mistranslated so that he, not Hawkeye, would be taken to be burned alive. "Take me! You must have a victim, and I am the right one to die. My masters among the redcoats cannot blame you for my decision to die."

The Sachem agreed. "You are brave, redcoat. I will accept your decision. She will live if you will die." The old man then told Hawkeye to take Cora to safety.

Magua was beaten in this decision, but he now had a bride who would humiliate the spirit of his enemy, Munro. Magua resentfully left the village with Alice Munro, his stunned and unwilling bride.

Duncan, not Cora, was taken away to be burned at the stake. Heywood had finally proven his heroism – not with guns or fists – but with a sacrifice of his life in exchange for the lives of his beloved girls.

Hawkeye knew to act fast. He hurried Cora to the outskirts of the Huron encampment, hoping against hope that they would get away before some hot-headed young warriors decided to kill them for the fun of it. Cora fought him every inch of the way. “My sister,” she screamed.

But Hawkeye dragged her away, repeating a promise: “Let me let you live this hour, and I promise we will follow that damned company of Hurons, free your sister, and kill the man – that Magua - who holds Alice in chains.” He then took Cora into the forest where they are reunited with Chingachgook and Uncas. But he did not forget Heywood’s terrible ordeal. He turned and saw the gruesome spectacle. Duncan Heywood was bound to a stake as the flames of a death fire lapped at his charred skin. Hawkeye took aim from a distance and mercifully shot Duncan dead, sparing the brave man further pain. The three men and Cora took off and ran deeper into the forest. They were soon within the darkness of the trees, safe for the time being.