

## Judge’s Award

### Hiawatha’s Smile

By Doug Harrell

#### September 2019

“I never thought I’d feel sad pulling up to Lucky 13,” said Amanda.

Zoë agreed. “Yeah, it’s so different without Grandmom Rae standing at the door waiting for us.”

Amanda drove up the narrow driveway at 13 Brooklyn Avenue, Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, and stopped just short of a large blue dumpster. The house, a side-by-side white-shingled duplex, was set well back from the street and shaded by several large pines. As much as the sisters wanted to keep it, they simply couldn’t afford it.

As Amanda was unlocking the door, Zoë reached over and stroked the house number. “Amanda, don’t forget to rub it for luck.”

Amanda lovingly ran her fingers over the numbers. “And Grandmom would never forgive us if we didn’t go straight up and thank Hiawatha.” Giggling, the two women ran up the stairs into a small back bedroom. On the wall was a painting of a proud Native American chief pointing toward a woman nursing an infant. “Thank you, Hiawatha.”

“Yes, thank you, Hiawatha,” Zoë echoed. Then, turning to her sister, “Amanda, do you know why we thank Hiawatha?”

Amanda shook her head. “Because he’s a great chief? I don’t know. I asked Grandmom once, but she said she didn’t know either. Great-grandmother Alice taught her to thank Hiawatha when she was a girl, and she taught mom and then us.”

Zoë reached out and touched the young mother in the painting. “That’ll be you soon.”

“Not for six more months. It’s so sad to think of never being able to come here again. I always dreamed we’d spend summers here with our own children, you and me, next door to each other. They’d be thick as thieves, building sandcastles on the beach and going on rides at Funland. Any luck convincing Jack to give my baby a cousin to play with?”

“Not yet. Jack says he needs a promotion first—either that, or we need to hit the lottery.”

After a quick lunch, Amanda and Zoë began the sad task of going through their late grandmother’s apartment and the guest apartment next door. They labeled some items “keep” or “donate,” and everything else went into the dumpster.

Amanda was tackling the kitchen when Zoë hurried down from the attic, carrying a red leather book with a gold “1931” embossed on the cover.

“Amanda, I found great-grandmother Alice’s diary. I know why we thank Hiawatha!”

#### May 1931

Memorial Day was approaching, but the weather seemed not to care. The curtain of clouds overhead looked like the underside of a bulky quilt, and a chilly breeze was blowing off the Atlantic. A hand-painted sign, “Furnished house for rent—inquire next door,” stood crookedly in front of the right half of 13 Brooklyn Avenue. In the backyard, Alice Gaines leaned over her basket and picked up one of Rae’s sopping-wet rompers. She threaded it into the wringer, and cranked the handle with vigor, squeezing out all the water but none of her worry.

The Joneses hadn’t paid the rent since March, and Alice had finally put them out. Since Charlie died, that money was Alice’s only source of income, and with a new baby and no husband, Alice was falling behind on the mortgage. Summer would bring renters, but after the

summer was over, how long before she and little Rae were out on the street? Alice was hanging the romper on the clothesline when a loud voice called out from behind her.

“Hey, lady ...”

Startled, Alice turned to see a well-dressed man coming around the house. He was wearing a gray pinstripe suit and a gray fedora, but what really caught her eye was the flash of white from his two-toned oxfords every time he put a foot forward. He advanced within a few feet of her.

“Hey, lady. I saw your sign out front.”

Alice wiped her hands on her apron. “Yes, are you interested?”

“Could be. Your husband around? Maybe I oughta talk to him.”

Alice’s throat clenched. “My husband died in March.”

“Oh, ain’t that a shame. I’m sorry.” The man touched his hand to the crown of his hat and waited for a respectful moment before continuing. “So, yeah, I’m interested, but I gotta have it right away, and I need it for the whole summer, maybe longer. Can you do that?”

Alice almost choked. “Yes. Give me a few hours and I’ll get it nice and clean for you.”

“Whaddaya want for it?”

Alice steeled herself. “I’m asking fifteen dollars a week.” Then, unsure of herself, she stammered, “But, you’ll want to see it first.”

He replied without flinching, “Naw, I’m sure it’ll be fine.” Then he raised his arm, pointing to the back of the yard. “That garage empty?”

“No, our car’s in there.”

The man shook his head. “I gotta have the garage too. Twenty bucks.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Twenty bucks a week for the house and the garage.” The man extracted a tight roll from his pants pocket, and peeled off four twenty-dollar bills, extending them toward Alice. “Here’s for the first month.”

Pocketing the money, Alice replied, “Yes, that will be quite satisfactory, Mr. ...?”

“Feldman. Benjamin Feldman.”

“Alice Gaines.”

“I’m gonna need to do some work in the garage. A little noise won’t bother ya, will it?”

“I shouldn’t think so. What kind of noise?”

“Just some hammering and sawing. I’m an art dealer down here to buy pictures. I hafta crate ’em up before I ship ’em back to Brooklyn. That’s part of what I like about your place—Brooklyn Avenue. That and the street number—thirteen. Most folks don’t like it, but thirteen’s my lucky number.”

Alice was beginning to feel lucky herself. She handed him the key.

“I’ll be back later. Just take your car out and leave the garage open for me, will ya?” With that, Mr. Feldman touched the brim of his hat, turned, and walked out of sight. A moment later she heard a car start up and drive away.

Back inside the house, Alice collapsed onto the sofa, sobbing. She and Rae would be OK—at least for now.

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Alice marshalled her mop, bucket, and brushes, and attacked the long-neglected grime in 13-B like a woman possessed. The cleaning done, she opened the padlock on the garage leaving the key in it, and swung the doors wide open. With a lump in her throat, she backed out the car and parked it on the street in front of the house. Charlie had been so proud of that car, one of the

new Chrysler coupes. She knew she was going to have to sell it eventually, but she couldn't bring herself do it. Not yet.

Hours later, as Alice was undressing for bed, she heard a car. Looking out, she saw a black sedan backing rapidly up the driveway and straight into the garage, facing out. Given his style of dress, Alice had expected Mr. Feldman's car to be fancier. After a moment, he emerged and swung the doors closed. He removed her padlock and tossed it into the garage before snapping on a new one and walking up to the house.

In bed, Alice lay awake pondering Mr. Feldman. She'd seen plenty of New Yorkers when she and Charlie used to play the ponies at the track in Havre de Grace. Still, it seemed strange that, as an art dealer, Mr. Feldman was so *exactly* like the kind of person you'd meet at a racetrack. Finally, exhausted, she fell into a deep and well-deserved sleep.

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The next morning, Alice was weeding the front garden when Mr. Feldman returned with a large framed picture across his back, holding it by the wire.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Feldman. I hope everything is to your liking.”

“Everything's swell. Thanks.”

“I see you've bought your first picture. Can I look?”

“Sure thing.” Rather than take the picture off his shoulder and hold it out, Mr. Feldman turned his back so Alice could see the painting. It was a colorful scene of a small harbor with houses and boats and a flock of seagulls hovering overhead.

“Oh, how pretty. What's it called?”

“*Herring Guts*. Makes sense, I guess, all them seagulls.”

Suppressing the urge to laugh, Alice gently corrected him. “You know what? I bet it's a painting of Herring Gut. That's a creek about an hour south of here.”

Mr. Feldman shrugged and turned back to face her. “Whatever.”

“Do New Yorkers enjoy country scenes like that?”

“Oh yeah ... sure. They can't wait to get their hands on 'em.” With a grin, he added, “Especially when they're big. The folks in Brooklyn like big paintings.”

To her surprise, Mr. Feldman locked the painting in the garage. Over the next few hours, Alice noticed Mr. Feldman come and go repeatedly, bringing back paintings, all large.

Alice was up nursing Rae just after midnight when she heard Mr. Feldman take his car out. At that time of night, he could only be on his way to a speakeasy.

Four hours later, Alice was awakened by the sound of tires on the gravel driveway. Looking out, she saw Mr. Feldman walking toward the house as purposefully as always, so either he hadn't drunk too much or he could hold his liquor.

Early the next morning, Alice heard voices. She peeked through the curtains as Mr. Feldman pulled his car out and led two men carrying boards into the garage, closing the doors behind them. Soon, she heard sawing and hammering. Alice wondered why they had closed the doors. Surely, it would be more pleasant with them open.

Curious, Alice snuck over to the garage window, but she couldn't see anything because the shade was down. As her shadow fell across the window, the sawing stopped. Alice was wondering whether she could make it back inside when she heard the garage door creaking open.

Embarrassed, she only had two alternatives: let Mr. Feldman catch her snooping or disappear. Quick as a cat, she climbed the nearest tree and froze. Below her, Mr. Feldman crept forward, arm extended, sunlight glinting off a chrome-plated revolver. After looking around, he returned to the garage. Alice gingerly climbed down and tiptoed back into the house.

*Oh my god. What have I gotten myself into?* Alice considered calling the police. Then she thought about Rae. Even if Mr. Feldman’s money was dirty, it was all she had. Alice decided to mind her own business.

Later that day, Alice saw a white delivery truck backing up the driveway. Two men loaded it with thin rectangular boxes as Mr. Feldman looked on. The boxes were only slightly larger than Mr. Feldman’s paintings. Alice felt silly. Apparently, the art world was more dangerous than she knew. After loading the last painting, the men shook Mr. Feldman’s hand, climbed into the truck, and drove away.

All summer, this was Mr. Feldman’s routine. He would bring paintings back to the garage, and every five or ten days he would take his car out at night and spend the following day supervising the crating for pick up by the same white van.

### **September 1931**

Alice worried that Mr. Feldman had decided to return to New York. September first had come and gone, and while he had not left, he had not paid either. Later that week, Alice decided to lie in wait for him by weeding the front yard. After a while, he came bounding up the walk with an enormous canvas slung across his back.

Leaping to her feet, Alice blurted out, “Oh, Mr. Feldman. I hope you’ll be staying with us a bit longer.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry,” he replied before adding, “I landed a big one today—take a look.” The painting was beautifully rendered and quite different in style and subject from anything she had seen Mr. Feldman bring back before. In it, a Native American chief stood proudly, chest out, a defiant look on his face. His left arm was outstretched in the direction of a squaw seated in front of a bark-and-timber longhouse, discreetly nursing the baby she held in her arms.

“Oh, what a dear picture.”

“Dear’s the right word. Cost me sixty bucks, but it was worth it. Look how big it is.”

Alice was amused at Mr. Feldman’s obsession with the size of his paintings and the way he never seemed to know or care about the titles. “What’s it called?”

“Some Indian name. It don’t matter.” Then he smiled. “Wait, he’s Hiawatha!” At that, Mr. Feldman laughed so hard that Alice rushed forward to steady the painting lest he scrape the frame on the sidewalk. Composing himself, Mr. Feldman straightened up, and still laughing, he carried the picture to the garage.

Around midnight, Alice heard Mr. Feldman take out his car, and the next morning she heard the familiar sounds of his men sawing and hammering. They hadn’t been at it long when a black sedan screeched to a halt in the driveway, and the driver ran to the garage, banging heavily until Mr. Feldman opened the door. Immediately, all four men began carrying paintings out of the garage and tossing them haphazardly into the back seats of both cars. Then they jumped into their cars and drove away, leaving behind a crate too large to fit. Alice began to cry. Not only hadn’t she gotten the rent for September, but the frantic nature of Mr. Feldman’s departure left no doubt he was gone for good.

Alice closed the garage and put the sign back out front. The next day at the market she nearly fainted when she saw a picture of Mr. Feldman on the front page of *The Sunday Morning Star* next to the banner headline: “Prohibition Agents Bust Alcohol Smuggling Ring: High-Speed Motor Launch *Hiawatha* Seized Near Taylors Island, Maryland.” With quivering hands, Alice paid for the paper before clutching Rae and dashing out of the store, leaving her shopping and a confused grocer in her wake.

The article was about a New York outfit that had been evading the Coast Guard vessels patrolling the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay and landing illegal booze by night along the Eastern Shore. Leading the operation was the boat’s owner, Benjamin “Little Bennie” Feldman. No wonder Mr. Feldman had laughed so hard when he called the chief in the painting “Hiawatha.” Even with them all safely in jail, it took three days for Alice to work up the courage to put her car back in the garage. It was a week before she decided the day had come to deal with the crate “Little Bennie” had left behind. If it held liquor she could just dump it—no one need know.

As she pried off the boards, she was delighted to find not hooch, but Hiawatha. Afraid of what people might think if they saw a poor widow with such an expensive-looking painting, she waited until after dark to sneak it upstairs. Alice hung it in the nursery, where Hiawatha could keep her company, at least until she had to sell him.

Alice was ashamed her rent money had come from crime. Hiawatha always seemed to be looking at her with a conspiratorially cocked head, as though he and Alice were “in on it” together. No matter how often she straightened Hiawatha, the next time Alice came into the room he was crooked again. Alice had begun talking to Hiawatha like a friend, and one day she asked him, “Why are you so crooked? Are you a crook?” Then, it hit her.

Initially, Alice hadn’t found it odd there was a thin wooden board fastened across the back of the frame. Now, she wondered if something was hidden behind it making the picture off balance. With trembling fingers she removed the screws and lifted the panel to reveal bundles of cash aligned in neat rows—five thousand dollars in all.

Alice now understood that while the gang had been smuggling and selling liquor, Mr. Feldman had overseen the shipments of cash disguised as art. She felt guilty keeping the money, but who was she going to give it to, gangsters? And if she turned it over to the police, maybe they would make her give back the rent money too. If that happened, she would lose the house.

Alice decided the best thing to do was to say nothing. With no need to sell him, Alice kept Hiawatha hanging in the nursery where together they shared their guilty secret.

## September 2019

Amanda walked over to the painting. “Imagine that, five thousand dollars.”

“According to this app, that’s eighty-five thousand in today’s money,” replied Zoë. “Say ... you don’t suppose there’s still any money back there, do you?”

“No, but we ought to take a look just to be sure.”

Zoë carefully lifted Hiawatha off the wall. After removing the screws, eyes squinting with hope, they leaned in and gingerly lifted the panel. All they found was a cavity. They had not really expected to find any money, but it was still a letdown.

“Well, that would’ve been fun, but even the whole five thousand wouldn’t have been enough for us to keep the house,” said Amanda.

Zoë nodded. Still hovering over the back of the painting, she ran her finger along the bottom corner. “Look, there’s something written here in pencil. ‘Magua said her bosom cannot nurse the children of a Huron.’ What do you suppose that refers to?”

“One way to find out.” Amanda did a quick search on her cell phone. “According to Project Gutenberg, it’s from *The Last of the Mohicans*.”

“Maybe this was an illustration. That would explain why it’s not signed.”

“It looks similar to the ones shown here.” Amanda swiped upwards several times, then began hyperventilating. “Oh my god ... Oh my god ... Oh my god ...”

### September 2020

With both their babies asleep, Amanda and Zoë paid their nightly visit to thank Hiawatha in what was now Amanda’s apartment.

The new painting of Hiawatha was a faithful copy of the original. The artist had succeeded in matching the style and getting all the colors exactly right. The only flaw was with the mouth of the imperious chief the sisters would forever refer to as Hiawatha. He now appeared to be smiling.

Their great-grandmother Alice’s painting had turned out to be the lost N. C. Wyeth illustration Scribner’s had found too risqué to include in their 1919 deluxe edition of *The Last of the Mohicans*. All those years, “Hiawatha” had hung there, appreciating in value to well over half a million dollars. The proceeds from the sale of the original had been enough for the sisters to keep 13 Brooklyn Avenue. The money had also helped Zoë convince Jack it was time to have their own child, born a few months after Amanda’s.

No wonder Hiawatha was smiling.

### Author’s Note

During the freewheeling days of prohibition, a veritable navy of small craft plied the waters between “Rum Row” and the myriad inlets and coves of the Delmarva peninsula. The motor launch *Hiawatha* was one such craft until she was captured by federal agents in 1931 in the Chesapeake Bay near Taylors Island.

World renowned artist and illustrator N. C. Wyeth studied under Howard Pyle at Pyle’s Wilmington and Rehoboth studios, and many of their fabulous illustrations can be seen at the Delaware Art Museum. Wyeth’s *The Harbor at Herring Gut* now hangs in the Brandywine River Museum. Wyeth’s illustration of Magua and the squaw has never been found.

Doug Harrell is a recovering engineer who has taken up mystery writing as a second career. Dividing his time between Pike Creek and Lewes, he loves weaving history and local lore into his stories. “Hiawatha’s Smile” is his fourth story published by Cat & Mouse Press. Visit him at [www.douglasharrell.com](http://www.douglasharrell.com).

### Judge’s Comment

An engaging mystery, this story captures several elements of the 1930s in Rehoboth and telescopes them into the present, where they happily resolve—by weaving together the legacy of a famous illustrator and equally famous writer, both of whom remain icons of American culture.