

The Skull and the Arrow

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

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Heavy clouds hung above the iron-colored peaks, and lancets of lightning flashed and probed. Thunder rolled like a distant avalanche in the mountain valleys... The man on the rocky slope was alone.

He stumbled, staggering beneath the driving rain, his face hammered and raw. Upon his skull a wound gaped wide, upon his cheek the white bone showed through. It was the end. He was finished, and so were they all ... they were through.

Far-off pines made a dark etching along the skyline, and that horizon marked a crossing. Beyond it was security, a life outside the reach of his enemies, who now believed him dead. Yet, in this storm, he knew he could go no farther. Hail laid a volley of musketry against the rock where he leaned, so he started on, falling at times.

He had never been a man to quit, but now he had. They had beaten him, not man to man but a dozen to one. With fists and clubs and gun barrels they had beaten him ... and now he was through. Yes, he would quit. They had taught him how to quit.

The clouds hung like dark, blowing tapestries in the gaps of the hills. The man went on until he saw the dark opening of a cave. He turned to it for shelter then, as men have always done. Though there are tents and wickiups, halls and palaces, in his direst need man always returns to the cave.

He was out of the rain but it was cold within. Shivering, he gathered sticks and some blown leaves. Among the rags of his wet and muddy clothing, he found a match, and from the match, a flame. The leaves caught, the blaze stretched tentative, exploring fingers and found food to its liking.

He added fuel; the fire took hold, crackled, and gave off heat. The man moved closer, feeling the warmth upon his hands, his body. Firelight played shadow games upon the blackened walls where the smoke from many fires had etched their memories ... for how many generations of men?

This time he was finished. There was no use going back. His enemies were sure he was dead, and his friends would accept it as true. So he was free. He had done his best, so now a little rest, a little healing, and then over the pine-clad ridge and into the sunlight. Yet in freedom there is not always contentment.

He found fuel again, and came upon a piece of ancient pottery. Dipping water from a pool, he rinsed the pot, then filled it and brought it back to heat. He squeezed rain from the folds of his garments, then huddled between the fire and the cave wall, holding tight against the cold.

There was no end to the rain ... gusts of wind whipped at the cave mouth and dimmed the fire. It was insanity to think of returning. He had been beaten beyond limit. When he was down they had taken turns kicking him. They had broken ribs ... he could feel them under the cold, a raw pain in his side.

Long after he had lain inert and helpless, they had bruised and battered and worried at him. Yet he was a tough man, and he could not even find the relief of unconsciousness. He felt every blow, every kick. When they were tired from beating him, they went away.

He had not moved for hours, and only the coming of night and the rain revived him. He moved, agony in every muscle, anguish in his side, a mighty throbbing inside his skull, but somehow he managed distance. He crawled, walked, staggered, fell. He fainted, then revived, lay for a time mouth open to the rain, eyes blank and empty.

By now his friends believed him dead... Well, he was not dead, but he was not going back. After all, it was their fight, had always been their fight. Each of them fought for a home, perhaps for a wife, children, parents. He had fought for a principle, and because it was his nature to fight.

With the hot water he bathed his head and face, eased the pain of his bruises, washed the blood from his hair, bathed possible poison from his cuts. He felt better then, and the cave grew warmer. He leaned against the wall and relaxed. Peace came to his muscles. After a while he heated more water and drank some of it.

Lightning revealed the frayed trees outside the cave, revealed the gray rain before the cave mouth. He would need more fuel. He got up and rummaged in the farther darkness of the cave. He found more sticks and carried them back to his fire. And then he found the skull.

He believed its whiteness to be a stick, imbedded as it was in the sandy floor. He tugged to get it loose, becoming more curious as its enormous size became obvious. It was the skull of a gigantic bear, without doubt from prehistoric times. From the size of the skull, the creature must have weighed well over a ton.

Crouching by the firelight he examined it. Wedged in an eye socket was a bit of flint. He broke it free, needing all his strength. It was a finely chipped arrowhead.

The arrow could not have killed the bear. Blinded him, yes, enraged him, but not killed him. Yet the bear had been killed. Probably by a blow from a stone ax, for there was a crack in the skull, and at another place, a spot near the ear where the bone was crushed.

Using a bit of stick he dug around, finding more bones. One was a shattered foreleg of the monster, the bone fractured by a blow. And then he found the head of a stone ax. But nowhere did he find the bones of the man.

Despite the throbbing in his skull and the raw pain in his side, he was excited. Within the cave, thousands of years ago, a lone man fought a battle to the death against impossible odds ... and won.

Fought for what? Surely there was easier game? And with the bear half blinded the man could have escaped, for the cave mouth was wide. In the whirling fury of the fight there must have been opportunities. Yet he had not fled. He had fought on against the overwhelming strength of the wounded beast, pitting against it only his lesser strength, his primitive weapons, and his man-cunning.

Venturing outside the cave for more fuel, he dragged a log within, although the effort made him gasp with agony. He drew the log along the back edge of his fire so that it was at once fuel and reflector of heat.

Burrowing a little in the now warm sand of the cave floor, he was soon asleep.

For three weeks he lived in the cave, finding berries and nuts, snaring small game, always conscious of the presence of the pine-clad ridge, yet also aware of the skull and the arrowhead. In all that time he saw no man, either near or far ... there was, then, no search for him.

Finally it was time to move. Now he could go over the ridge to safety. Much of his natural strength had returned; he felt better. It was a relief to know that his fight was over.

At noon of the following day he stood in the middle of a heat-baked street and faced his enemies again. Behind him were silent ranks of simple men.

„We’ve come back,“ he said quietly. „We’re going to stay. You had me beaten a few weeks ago. You may beat us today, but some of you will die. And we’ll be back. We’ll always be back.“

There was silence in the dusty street, and then the line before them wavered, and from behind it a man was walking away, and then another, and their leader looked at him and said, „You’re insane. Completely insane!“ And then he, too, turned away and the street before them was empty.

And the quiet men stood in the street with the light of victory in their eyes, and the man with the battered face tossed something and caught it again, something that gleamed for a moment in the sun.

„What was that?“ someone asked.

„An arrowhead,“ the man said. „Only an arrowhead.“

