

THE COWBOYS OF CTHULHU By David Bain
CHAPTER XIII: THE COWBOYS OF CTHULHU
or THE BANDITS FROM BEYOND

-
(BEING THE LOST CHAPTER
OF T. H. THOMASMA'S
WORLD-FAMOUS BIOGRAPHY,
"GENTLEMAN JOHN BRODIE a.k.a. 'THE DEMON DUELIST'")

--
IN WHICH WE MAY LEARN
THE TRUE REASONS WHY OUR HERO-
THE FAMED FORMER OUTLAW
WHO DIED A PEACE-BRINGING LAWMAN,
BELOVED OF HIS COMMUNITY
AND ALL THE LAND-
TURNED TRUE OF HEART
AND LARGE OF SOUL

**1. Jesse James meets the Curious Caravan
of Darke Dee-lites**

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AND so it came to pass that, fleeing at full gallop from the Murphy Gang, our hero, The Demon Duelist John Dunsworth Brodie, astride his trusty stolen Appaloosa--known to the natives as "A Fury of Wings"--galloped toward the peaceable town of Riley's Rock in the Utah Territory.

His heart near exploded when, as he raced into the town proper, he heard a gunshot crack the very air.

Brodie ducked his head close to Fury's fluttering mane. Had the shot come from behind? Brodie glanced back at the desert behind him, spurring Fury to fly into town at a speed only that horse could achieve.

No Murphys behind, so Brodie spurred Fury around a corner--and saw he was plowing directly into a gathered throng of townspeople, only now turning from the spectacle before them to the one behind--namely him.

They were gathered to watch none other than the famed Dr. Darius Darke's Shootist Show & Curious Caravan of Darke Dee-lites.

Indeed, our hero had interrupted the stylishly dressed Dr. Darke in the act of squeezing all but the last pound of pressure on a trigger of a Colt, poised to shoot an apple off the head of a buckskin-clad squaw.

Darke's infamous gaze--which could paralyze an ordinary man--was aimed at Brodie, but his gun was still aimed at the injun gal. The two infamous gunslingers stared each other down for several tense heartbeats.

Then, without ever breaking eye contact with Brodie, Darke fired.

A thin spray of pulp revealed a clean hole in the apple, which did not even tumble off the squaw's head.

A half-second later Brodie whipped his rifle out of his saddle holster. He fired at the squaw before the crowd could even hit the dirt.

The squaw shrieked and ducked.

The apple blew to smithereens in mid-air as her head dropped out from beneath it.

"Now Darius," Brodie said, "didn't you tell these here kind folks that the one and only Jesse James was ridin' in late to join the show?"

With a communal gasp, the crowd looked up at him in sudden wide-eyed disbelief.

Dr. Darke, whose eyes had never left Brodie's, raised a quizzical eyebrow. "You know, Jess," he said, "I plum forgot to mention you, you were so late."

There was a glint in the man's eyes that Brodie recognized. *Darn it all.* The man was going to challenge "Jesse James" to a showdown. And if there was anyone in the West who could outdraw The Demon Duelist, it was Darke.

At least one legend, maybe two, would have fallen in Riley's Rock that afternoon, had the sheriff not immediately intervened.

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2. "Them Bastards Ate My Husband's Brains!"

BEFORE either Darke or Brodie could speak, Sheriff Joe Hollis was at Brodie.

"First of all," the sheriff said, pointing a finger in Brodie's face, "you ain't no Jesse James. I seen the posters in Salt Lake City, and you ain't him. By God, I remember the face attached to a \$10,000 reward. But that don't matter today. Whoever you are, point is, you can shoot."

He turned to the stage and addressed Darke, his voice suddenly much more respectful. "You give us some good fun today, Doc, and we thank ye for it. But we hear, sir, that you sometimes take on, shall we say, *special* work."

Darke nodded slowly, cautiously, suddenly all business, his new rivalry with the stranger instantly forgotten. "If the price is right," Darke said.

"Three thousand dollars, guaranteed by the governor hisself, to bring us the heads of three men--at least, we *think* they're men."

"*Them bastards ate my husband's brains!*" a woman in the crowd suddenly shrieked, then broke into wretched sobbing. Other onlookers quickly moved to comfort her.

"Now, now. We don't know they *ate* it, Loretta," Hollis said. "But yeah, these bandits, they've been ... takin' off the faces, peelin' off the skin, takin' out the brains. And strangest of all, they leave the gosh-durned money. They been takin' just the guns, the clothes, the horses. The cattle, they mutilate them too."

"Tell 'em about Carter and the posse!" yelled a man in the audience.

"Yup. And then there's Carter," Hollis said. "After the first attacks out on the trail between here and Needle Bottom, we sent out a posse of a full score of men. Only Randy Carter come back, and he wasn't long for this earth. And I might add ol' Randy didn't make a lick of sense after he come back. We sent *twenty* men, mind you, against what Carter said was only three, and the sole survivor come back nuts. When he spoke what sounded like American at all, he mostly babbled. Things like, '*the haunted canyon, 'masked bandits spittin' bullets, 'he said. 'Silent, creeping fish men ate their faces' and 'eyes burning in my brain.'*' Said '*Doom waits deep in the earth.*' To be completely fair, I guess some of that claptrap did sound a little like American, but random words was still all they was. *Cat hoodoo fat hag hen!*" was one thing he said almost constant."

"Desert heat can do a mean number on a man's brain, 'less he's got a load of gumption," Brodie said.

"Yes, especially when a man's seen his provincial posse slaughtered by seasoned professionals, as these bandits surely are," Darke added. "Sheriff, you have my guarantee. Your town shall be free of this scourge within a week, be it by my gun or its mere reputation."

The sheriff nodded. "Good," he said, then turned to Brodie. "You gonna say who you really are, 'Jesse James?'"

"Not today, Sheriff," he answered. "But I think I get where this is goin'. How 'bout I volunteer to go off into the desert and hunt me down some alleged fish people banditos. Meanwhile, I'd be much obliged if you could keep the town mum should a certain notorious gang come through here askin' for a certain legendary young pistolero."

"Done," Hollis said. "Dr. Darke, looks like Jesse James hisself gonna help you hunt down them bandits."

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3. Guarded Secrets of Dr. Darke and General Kang Revealed

BRODIE, astride Fury, and the caravan left that very afternoon, heading east, to scout the bandit-haunted trail between Riley's Rock and Needle Bottom. All Brodie cared was that the Murphys were to the west.

The Caravan, consisting of three wagons, was indeed a curious one. In the first rode Dr. Darke and the squaw, a young, lovely and exceedingly quiet Chippewa named Doe Song. Winking, Darke told Brodie she was the best he'd ever encountered with a man's pistol, and that she wasn't a bad shot, either.

In the stinking rear wagon was One-Eyed Jack, the animal keeper, a scraggly-bearded former mountain man who looked more like a pirate with his stained and faded frilly shirt, cheap bandanna and tattered eye patch. Jack cursed with every other word, and his parrot, Hester, apparently had no ear for the finer half of Jack's verbiage.

Although Jack's whiskey-laden breath was responsible for a good portion of the wagon's foul odor, most of it came from his other companion, Orson. Orson was a bear.

"*Yargh!* Ya ****ing missed that **** Orson ****ing takin' target practice, Jesse **** James," One-Eyed Jack growled.

"We only let him shoot blanks, but it makes the yokels laugh, watching a bear shoot a shotgun," Darke explained.

Driving the center wagon, which housed the Darke Dee-lites, was Norman the Idiot Boy. Darke said Norman was only good for two things, driving and shooting. To get him to drive, you simply stated a compass point and the ever-silent Norman would forever push the horses in that direction until you told him otherwise. "Same thing with shooting," Darke told Brodie. "You line up two dozen tin cans and say 'Norman, shoot cans!' and he'll shoot and reload, shoot and reload until all the cans are gone. He won't miss a single one, either."

The center wagon, in which a blanket for the night awaited "Jesse James," was also home to, in Darke's words, "the curator of the caravan's arcana--General Kang, The Mystic Mercenary, Supreme Warlord of the Heathen Chinees.

"He's meditating right now--sort of like sleeping while sitting up," Darke said. "He really is an impressive

person--err, for a Chinaman, that is. Just go on in and make yourself comfortable--but don't disturb him."

In the center of the wagon, sitting Indian style on a strangely patterned rug with his arms folded, was a short, bald, skinny--but wiry-muscled--Oriental chap. He wore only what looked to Brodie to be a sort of thick diaper. In a jar near him was what looked to be a small, pickled octopus with a rather odd label: "The Madness from the Sea." Next to that was a taxidermical nightmare, a creature labeled "The Ferocious Bavarian Wolpertinger." It looked like a jackrabbit posed *rampant* with duck's feet, vampire fangs, deer antlers, bat wings, badger's claws and a hound dog's tail. In a glass case was a collection of alleged "Unicorn Horns."

Amidst a vast array of similar displays, Brodie saw several large, crumbling, leather-bound books. Or was that leather? And what kind of writing was that? He'd spent a couple days with a Chinese gal in a bordello up in Frisco. He woke once to find her reading, and they'd cuddled as she'd tried to teach him a few of the convoluted characters. This here writing looked even more confusing than Chinese.

But suddenly it came clear. It had been English letters all along. Must have been the muted light of the wagon. First he made out a word: NECK. Then a name came clear: RON. The name proved to be an Irish one: O'MICK. Then a reference to a man in prison: CON.

NECK RON O'MICK CON. Something about Ron O'Mick the con's neck. Was it about a hanged man? Maybe the title was all mixed up. He remembered the Chinese whore had read her book backwards.

Brodie found himself reaching out to pull the book from the shelf.

General Kang's amazingly strong hand was suddenly clamped on his arm. Brodie turned to him and saw the man's slanted eyes remained closed. "Most items in this wagon, you may look, but not touch. At this dread book, I suggest you not even look."

Kang released him, his eyes still shut. Brodie turned his back on all the strangeness and tried to clear his head by looking out the rear of the wagon. His best friend, Fury, was tied there, and out there beyond his brave steed, the golden disk of the sun was setting purple and fiery red in the west.

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ONE-EYED Jack gave them all some stringy jackrabbit stew he'd wrangled up. Brodie thought of the Wolpertinger and shuddered--then shuddered even worse, watching Jack eat from the same long wooden spoon with which he was feeding Orson. Meanwhile, Hester sat on Jack's shoulder, occassionally squawking random nastiness. Darke, Doe Song, Norman and Kang--who was using chopsticks--ate silently, oblivious to the bird.

When he finished, the General stood and faced Darke, who was still eating. "Listen to me, Darius. I believe there something here only I see before. I think it ... most strange ... quite dangerous. More than dangerous, but ... there no other words. I instruct more tomorrow. Tonight, no fear. Tonight, we sleep safe."

Darke nodded.

With that, General Kang strode back to his wagon, his hands folded inside his robes.

Brodie hastened to Darke's side. "You gonna let him talk to you like that? Like he's givin' the orders? Using your first name? You gonna take that from a heathen Chinee?" he asked. "For Pete's sake, man, you let him talk like he *owns* this here caravan!"

The piercing gaze of Dr. Darius Darke gripped Brodie like an iron fist.

"There are more things in heaven and on earth than you could hope to understand, boy!" Darke said. He turned away, was silent a moment, sighed. "I know, I know. I must control my anger. Okay, listen to me, kid. The general is a great, learned man. He has expanded my mind and can do the same for you. It's been said that he sees into men's hearts, but that's wrong. He sees into men's *minds*--a great and terrible burden." Now he fixed his fiercest gaze on Brodie again. "And if you tell this to another white man, it would be a race between him and me to see who'd kill you first--but for your information, he *does* own this caravan."

Darke set down his bowl and Doe Song came and laid her head on his shoulder. Brodie was spouting questions, but Darke would say no more, only staring into the fire.

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BRODIE stood at the rear entrance to General Kang's wagon, his sandlewood-handled Colt drawn and pointed at the Oriental man, who was back to meditating. "You hypnotized Dr. Darius Darke, you heathen."

"I don't hypnotize *nobody*," Kang said, his eyes remaining shut. "The doc think he need to know secrets of the universe. *Hah!* I tell him things every Hindoo in diapers know and he think he enlightened."

"Dr. Darke's a legend! He was a hero of mine when I was just a boy! Open your eyes and fight like a man!"

The General opened his eyes, but didn't move from his sitting position. "I tell you something, 'Jesse James'--that squaw just a squaw and Norman just Norman, but otherwise we all showmen here, you, me, Dr. Darke. We hide reality beneath. I kick through board or use big men's own strength against them and everyone think I 'one mean dawg.' *Hah!* That stuff taught to babies where I come from. And no, I not Chinese. And you not Jesse James--but you still a boy--and I never been in no army. And the doc, he never study in Persia or Peru like he tell all the people. Hell, he never even been to Mexico. *I* study in Persia and Peru and Paris, too. *I* been places you think only fairy tales. I study lots, you bet! There ways to use your mind most men never dream. We probably get big lesson in that tomorrow."

"The hell you talkin' about?" Brodie said. "And what about One-Eyed Jack? What's he got to hide?"

Kang chuckled "*****! I always *****ing forgetting that *****. No, that *****ing ***** for *****ing real. So his *****ing bear."

Brodie chuckled in spite of himself. "Okay, General. I ain't gonna shoot you. But what's all this fooforaw about tomorrow? What's up with these here bandits?"

The general grew strangely serious. "Problem is, I not know exactly. They not ordinary, though, I tell you that. I got to meditate and read all night, give instruction at high noon."

"See here, General, what good's all this here ... *meditaytin* doin' us anyway?"

"I explain tomorrow, Jesse James. Maybe I not even need to explain, if I right about these bandits. You sleep now, big Mr. Outlaw. I think you gonna need it."

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BRODIE woke only once before morning. His eyes fluttered open and--maybe it was just a dream--he thought he saw General Kang reading the NECK RON O'MICK CON book by the flickering light of a dim oil lamp. His bald head was covered with sweat, fists clenched to his temples, teeth gritted, every

facial muscle strained. He looked for all the world, Brodie thought, like a man trying desperately to keep his brains from exploding.

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IV. Blazing Bullets and Desert Death Songs at The Canyon of Cthulhu

BRODIE spent the morning in silence, rolling cigarettes and sitting with Norman, who was driving the second wagon. Kang was inside, meditating.

Brodie had woke up that morning and saw the man was still reading the weird book. He didn't look quite as intense anymore, though.

"My God, man. Don't you never sleep?" Brodie asked.

"I sleep while reading," Kang had replied. "Is, in fact, requirement to be sleep while read parts of this book."

Brodie had just shaken his head and stumbled outside to make water and tend to Fury before the caravan got going.

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KANG had called it near perfect. Darke called a halt to the caravan at five minutes before high noon.

"I presume that's our destination, General?" Darke said, pointing to a far-off box canyon, roughly straight ahead on the horizon. There were other hills, buttes and arroyos to be seen, but that particular canyon looked *different*. The walls of the canyon appeared to be roughly perpendicular to the ground--but then again they didn't. You looked at them a minute and it looked like the tops of the canyon walls nearly met--or did they form a "V"?

Kang nodded. "They know we coming. They ... smell me in the night."

"What are these dang bandits? Coyotes?" Brodie asked.

"His mind, you rube," Darke said. "They smelled his mind."

"Yeah. And they never smell anything like it before. That why they hiding, waiting in ambush."

"They didn't really smell it, right?" Brodie said. "It was that mediatin' stuff."

"You one smart cookie, Jessie James," Kang said.

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BRODIE was assigned by the General to watch the rear of the caravan. Standing in the back of One-Eyed Jack's stinking wagon, he began to notice two things. The first was that it was taking too long to get to the canyon. The second was that the caravan was weaving, leaving a winding trail behind it.

"Hey Jack, you share that whiskey with the other drivers or something? This caravan's tracks got more curves than a rattlesnake's."

"****, no!" One-Eyed Jack barked. "I ain't ****in' sharin' my ****in' whiskey with ****ing nobody! **** it! That ****ing canyon's ****ing movin' on us! I'll be ****ed! First the ****er's to the ****ing left, then the ****'s to the ****ed right! ****! ****! ****! And the ****ing more we ****ing drive, the further the it ****ing gets from us! **** ****ing ****!"

Hester bawled out the final word of her master's rant, as if for added emphasis.

Orson the bear groaned. He was pacing as best he could in the tight space of his cage.

Brodie tightened his grip on his pistol.

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AND suddenly, without warning, they were in the canyon.

Too fast. Too suddenly.

And suddenly the air didn't feel right.

And suddenly there was something in Brodie's mind. It was a heat and a hurt and a sudden lack of sense. It was a babble and a burning. It was a fuzzy blue light in the center of the brain that lit nothing and felt black.

And suddenly blazing through it like a white-hot but short-lived shooting star was the General's voice: *Pick one thing and think of it only. Something holy to you.* Brodie had the sense that Kang had simultaneously spoken those same words to everyone in the caravan.

Orson roared and reared up on his hind legs, his great head and shoulders clanging against the ceiling of his cage.

Brodie tried to think only of the smell of his poor murdered mother's fresh baked bread--and for a moment the burning became less and the blue-black light diminished.

But then he realized that, while his beloved mama's bread was indeed special to him, it wasn't exactly holy.

And then Hester started squawking a blue streak.

And Orson began roaring and actively throwing himself against the walls of his cage.

Somewhere, Doe Song screamed and shouted something. It sounded far away, on the other side of the desert.

And then the shooting began.

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THERE was no way that hail of gunfire came from only three enemy guns. Brodie hunkered down beneath the sideboards of the wagon--ready to cut a hole in the canvas to shoot through if he had to--when One-Eyed Jack and a horse screamed simultaneously and he was sent flying butt over wagon wheels. Brodie missed being crushed by the bear's cage by only a few inches, and he swore a string of oaths that, had she been capable, would have made Hester blush--and it was in that string of curse words he found what he considered holy.

His rage.

His rage at injustice. His rage for his murdered family. His rage at being constantly on the run.

His rage at being alone in the world.

And rage was how he kept his sanity when he crawled out of the overturned wagon and saw what was shooting at him from behind some rocks up on the canyon wall.

It was a monster dressed in cowboy duds.

As if in confirmation, Brodie heard Darke yell, "Norman! Shoot monsters!" from somewhere on the other side of the Utah Territory.

The beast, Brodie saw, was like a man, with two arms and two legs--it was maybe even slightly smaller than an average man--but where its head should have been was ... something like an octopus, or a squid. He caught glimpses of boots and dusty jeans and a regular button-up shirt. There was a blue bandanna around its neck and an honest-to-goodness 10-gallon hat on its head.

But its eyes were large and bulbous, all pupil, and its skin was purple and it had no mouth or nose that he could see. Instead, where the lower half of its face should be, it had at least six long, snaky tentacles.

And in every other tentacle was a blazing six-shooter.

The free tentacles were working the hammers, and, working from ammunition belts slung around its shoulders, the humanoid hands were busy reloading a fourth pistol.

Brodie quickly noted one important thing. The monster was a terrible shot. Apparently it couldn't quell or compensate for a slight undulation in its tentacles.

In other words, he could take a second to aim.

And his first well-aimed shot went a mile wide of the abomination, despite his holy rage, dust flying off the rock to the far right of the thing, which kept up its steady rain of bullets.

Dang! Now Brodie remembered the way the canyon's dimensions had distorted like a mirage from a distance. He and all the other guns in the Curious Caravan's employ would be worse shots than the monsters here in the canyon.

Brodie scrambled to take cover, the wagon to his back and a heap of rocks in front of him. From here, while taking potshots at the monster, he could see that there were indeed only two other monsters, but each was armed same as the first. As the bullets flew, he noted that the others in the caravan had taken on defensive positions similar to his own--except he couldn't see the General.

"*Yaaargh!*" came a cry from nearby--One-Eyed Jack had been hit. In the shoulder. But it was the shoulder opposite the one bracing his shotgun, and the mountain man quickly started firing doubletime, hollering out a series of extended barbaric yawps.

General Kang--magnificent in red robes bearing strange symbols outlined in black--was suddenly standing atop a huge rock.

"Get down you danged fool!" Brodie yelled.

But the General put his hands to his temples and, scrunching up his face, did something that Brodie felt in his mind. It was like a push--that was the only word he could come up with for it.

And suddenly his mind was filled with a silent scream from the three monsters--and from something deep within the earth?

And for the slightest instant the monsters stopped shooting and the geometry of the canyon was normal again.

Brodie seized the opportunity an instant too late--his shot missed just by an inch. But another--from *the squaw's* shotgun?--hit the mark. Down went one monster, its head exploding into purple cheese.

But in the next instant everything was worse than before. Whatever was in the earth roared in Brodie's brain. The others grabbed their temples as well. The fever thrashed against Brodie's holy rage--strange thoughts (*Ai! Ai! Cthulhu fhtagn!*) trying to bloom--and the geometry got downright unfathomable.

Brodie's aim remained square and true, but the bullets seemed to take a whirlwind course, hitting left, then far right, then in the ground in front of him.

Norman grunted hard and Brodie could see he was bleeding from the head--he'd probably just been grazed. The boy fought on tirelessly with his six-gun barking out shot after shot.

Suddenly Hester changed her tune from English cuss words to gibberish that made a strange kind of sense to the section of Brodie's mind where the fever seethed. "*Ph-nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!*" the bird squawked. "*N'gai, n'gha'ghaa, bugg-shoggog, y'hah; Yog-Sothoth!*" it screeched. "*H'yuh! Ygnaiih! Thftthkh'ngha! Y'bthnk h'ehye-n'grkdl'lh!*"

The bird then came flying out of the overturned wagon and presently exploded in a bright burst of feathers--whether from a monster's bullet or from the abominations in its brain and beak, Brodie would never be sure.

And then, as if to avenge his fellow fallen critter, Orson the bear lumbered out of the back of the wagon, his cage apparently broken when the wagon overturned. The great grizzly stood on his hind legs, bellowed--and raised a Henry rifle. It was said of a Henry rifle that you could load it on Sunday and shoot it all week--it held 15 shots. The bear blasted away.

The gun had not been loaded with blanks--the first shot kicked dust only a few inches over the head of the monster with which Brodie had been engaged.

And Orson's second shot hit Dr. Darius Darke full in the face.

The squaw let out a cry of shock and grief and so did Brodie and One-Eyed Jack. Brodie knew that the other two had felt it in their brains as well--although they hadn't been aware that they could feel each other's presences in their minds, they felt Darke's life extinguished like a bright candle blown out in a room of infinite night.

A whisper, from General Kang: "*Fight on, my warriors. I am preparing.*"

Brodie and the others instantly knew even that message was more than the General should have been able to afford.

In the next second, One-Eyed Jack roared with vengeful delight when he hit Brodie's monster in the shoulder--but the thing only fired faster.

And in the next instant, One-Eyed Jack got shot directly through his good eye.

He twitched briefly on the ground but didn't get up.

Orson dropped the rifle, ran to him and howled, an awful, primal sound. He was taking a number of shots from the monster's gun--but that only seemed to make the bear more angry.

Kang was suddenly up on the rock again--for a moment Brodie thought the General had *flown* there, and perhaps that was even true--and this time there seemed to be physical light brighter than the sun's emanating from the small Oriental man.

"*Norman, shoot monsters!*" Brodie cried, totally prepared this time. Both their bullets hit home.

Norman's monster's head exploded into purple pulp, and Brodie saw the ten-gallon hat go sailing off his quarry's head as the monster dropped behind the rocks.

The survivors sprinted over to Kang, who lay prone on the big rock. The weird reality of the canyon was swimming in and out, making it take longer for them to reach him.

Kang's eyes flickered back and forth somewhere far back in his head. His eyelids fluttered.

"Not ... dead," Kang managed once Brodie was looking down at him.

"I can see that," Brodie said. "And I feel it in my head. Your presence is strong. But we gotta get you outta the sun."

"No ... fool," Kang said. "*It ... not ... dead!*"

And suddenly Brodie felt in his mind where the monster was squatting, hiding, but too late--it rose up from behind its rock and shot him in the leg. With other pistols it missed the squaw--who had dropped her weapon to reach Kang--but hit Norman in the shoulder.

Brodie fought to remain upright, but collapsed on his leg, feeling helpless--and then Orson, who had led himself to the monster by sense of smell, not dimension-skewed vision, rose up and enveloped the horror in a brutal bear hug. The bear's muzzle quickly became a mess of purple foam as it ate.

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V. The Gentleman on Wings

AND so it came to pass that our hero and his surviving friends gave Darius Darke and One-Eyed Jack decent burials. Then, collecting Fury and the remaining wagons, he took Norman and the squaw and Orson the bear away from that haunted land.

They rode back into Riley's Rock to the sight of the Murphy gang swinging from the gallows. Seems they had blundered up a bank robbery, shooting the bank manager.

As for Brodie, he collected his reward and told the tale as most of us know it--that Darius Darke, a worthy brother-in-arms if ever Brodie had one, had fought valiantly against a horde of thirty or more bandits and had gone down after killing almost all of them single-handed.

Brodie and his charges then headed west, toward California, and then along the coast up to San Francisco, eventually winding up in the Oregon Territory where he changed Fury's name to Wings and founded Grizzly Gulch, which he served as sheriff or mayor until his dying days.

Doe Song became his wife and Norman became his son, and Orson, who had perpetually loose and gassy bowels after eating the monster, became his best friend--after Wings, of course.

Along the Oregon trail, Gentleman John sold the wagons and the various artifacts, but to General Kang he kept a promise. In many different locales, so its ashes couldn't come together, he burned that nefarious book, *The Necronomicon*, page by infernal page. He did this only after the others were asleep, for in those flames and in that smoke he saw many strange and awful things which he would not repeat to anyone, not for the rest of his long, long life.

Ah, but what of the General?

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AFTER resting and after Brodie benefitted from some of the native healing arts known to Doe Song, Brodie and Kang found a deep cavern from which the monsters had surely emerged. Though Brodie

offered to accompany him, Kang (whose real name, he revealed, was simply Hui Sang, a very common name) said he had to go on into the cave alone, that his mission was too strange and secret--and too urgent--for the untrained mind.

Although he wouldn't go into detail, Hui Sang said he'd seen this before. In places deep across this earth, he said, there slept Elder Gods who had arrived when this desert was still a sea. Most likley these bandits were of a race which was long ago human, he said, but they were long hence corrupted by What Sleeps Below. "These three we kill be only scouts," he said. "Only this Mad God's monkeys. They see humans and try to make war our way. More of them surely coming. Unless I do now as my teachers before me do. I now try to enter this Insane God's infinite dreams. Is a strange kind of warfare, what I must do. Make most men crazy--will make *me* crazy before ending--yet even if I win, the One I war with hardly care, barely notice. If I win, I only help it sleep a few more generations of man."

Then the little Oriental man disappeared, empty-handed, into the bowels of the earth.

Although he never heard from Hui Sang again, John Brodie and Wings did indeed return alone one day, years later, to what he had come to think of as The Canyon of Cthulhu--that weird word haunted his dreams always. But the canyon, he said, was now "just more regular ol' desert." The remains of the abandoned overturned wagon were still there, and so were the graves of One-Eyed Jack and Darius Darke, but the cave they'd found was sealed--be that by natural means or other, he was unable (or unwilling) to say.

As we shall see in future chapters of this book, folks looked at Brodie differently after his time in the desert. Many said he had a way of seeing into a man's soul, and when asked for advice on living righteously with one's fellow man, Brodie always said the same phrase, though he told only a select few of its origin.

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BEFORE Hui Sang disappeared completely, Brodie thought to ask his friend what wisdom he could impart.

Hui Sang considered a moment, then said this: "Whatever you do in this life, it not very important--but it very important that you do it."