

WHAT HORRIBLE SECRET HAUNTS
THE DESERT LANDS OF...

THE SERPENT PEOPLE



HANDLEY FELT THE FIRST HINT OF EVENING CHILL BRUSH PAST HIS CHEEK. HE WAS USED TO THE DESERT EXTREMES AND HE WELCOMED THE APPROACHING DARKNESS. IT WOULD SHIELD HIM FROM HIS PURSUERS AND GIVE HIM A CHANCE TO REST.

HIS ONLY CONCERN WAS WATER. FLUSHED FROM HIS USUAL HIDING PLACE, HANDLEY HAD ESCAPED INTO THE DESERT. THEY WOULDN'T FOLLOW HIM HERE...NOT IN THIS PART OF THE WILDERNESS!

WHOA THERE, CHIEF! YOU SHOULDN'T JUMP OUT ON PEOPLE LIKE THAT! IT AIN'T SAFE!



THE WHITE EYES IS NOT WELCOME HERE! THE SERPENT PEOPLE HAVE FORBIDDEN IT!

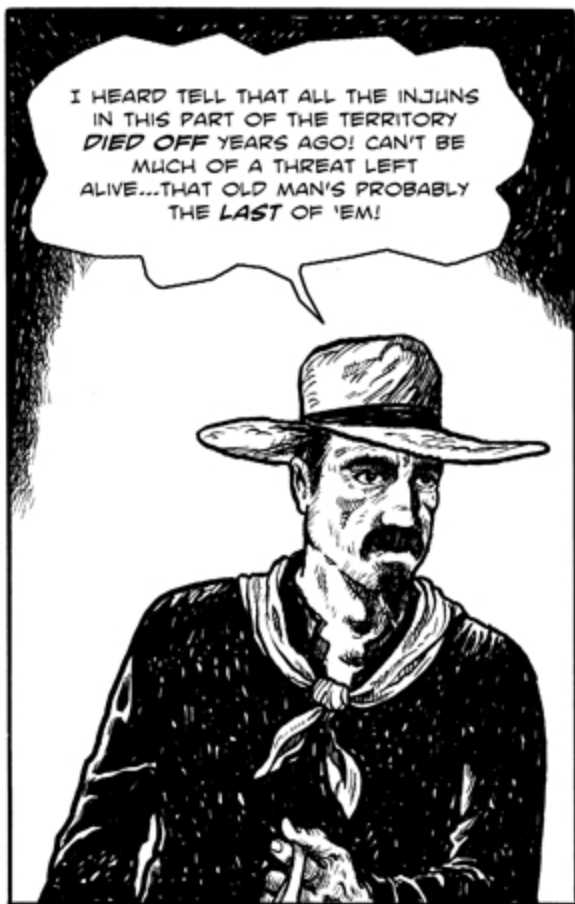


HANDLEY REHOLSTERED HIS COLT. THE DECREMENT, OLD MAN WAS CLEARLY NO THREAT. HE STARTED TO MOVE OFF INTO THE STONE-GIRT HILLS.

*BEWARE OF THE NIGHT, WHITE EYES!
THE SERPENT PEOPLE
ARE MASTERS OF IT!*



I HEARD TELL THAT ALL THE INJINS
IN THIS PART OF THE TERRITORY
DIED OFF YEARS AGO! CAN'T BE
MUCH OF A THREAT LEFT
ALIVE...THAT OLD MAN'S PROBABLY
THE LAST OF 'EM!



ANYWAYS...ME AND THE
HORSE NEED REST IF WE'RE
TO GET OUT OF HERE
BEFORE THAT POSSE THINKS
TO LOOK IN THIS GOD-
FORSAKEN PLACE!



HANDLEY HAD BEEN ALL OVER THE
SOUTHWEST IN PURSUIT OF ILL-GOTTEN
PROFIT, BUT THIS DESERT FILLED HIM WITH
AN INEXPLICABLE FEELING OF UNEASE.
EVEN AS SLEEP BEGAN TO OVERTAKE HIM,
HANDLEY'S THOUGHTS GRAPPLED WITH THE
SOURCE OF HIS DISCOMFORT...

QUIET...NOT A
COYOTE'S CRY...OR
BEETLE'S CHIRP...NO
SOUNDS...



HARD PRACTICE HAD MADE HANDLEY A LIGHT SLEEPER. HE SUDDENLY SNAPPED TO CONSCIOUSNESS...

HOLD



DO NOT BE AFRAID, HANDLEY! I HAVE COME TO WARN YOU! YOU ARE IN THE LAND OF THE SERPENT PEOPLE! EVEN AS WE SPEAK, THEY ARE COMING FOR YOU!



WHAT'RE YOU TALKING ABOUT, GIRL? WHO--?

THEY ARE *HERE!* THEY HAVE COME FROM THE SPIRIT WORLD...FOR YOU!



WORDS COULD NOT DESCRIBE THE HORSEMEN THAT WERE THUNDERING TOWARD HANDLEY! THE BLAZING SUNLIGHT SEEMED TO FILTER THROUGH THEM, LIKE A MIRAGE, YET THE WAR WHOOPS AND EARTH-SHAKING CLATTER WERE IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE!

ALL TOO USED TO TIGHT SPOTS, HANDLEY REGAINED HIS COMPOSURE QUICKLY. IN CLOSE, THE NATIVES WERE FORMIDABLE OPPONENTS...HE HAD TO USE SUPERIOR FIREPOWER IF HE WERE TO SURVIVE THE ATTACK. GRABBING THE WINCHESTER, HE CUT LOOSE!



NO USE! THE BULLETS
PASS RIGHT THROUGH
THEM!



THEY ARE THE *SERPENT*
PEOPLE, HANDLEY! YOU
CAN ONLY DEFEAT THEM
IF THEY ARE DEPRIVED OF
THEIR *TALISMAN*! LOOK
TO THEIR *MEDICINE*
BUNDLES!



SQUINTING IN THE BLAZING SUNLIGHT,
HANDLEY SCANNED THE SPECTRAL RIDERS
BEARING DOWN UPON HIM! AT THE THROAT
OF THE LEAD FIGURE, A SMALL LEATHER BAG
SWUNG TO THE RHYTHM OF THE HORSE'S
FURIOUS GAIT!



I'VE GOT TO LET
THEM CLOSE...THIS'LL
BE TRICKY!

THE TARGET WAS
IMPOSSIBLY SMALL
AND HANDLEY
NEEDED TWO OR
THREE SHOTS FOR
ANY CHANCE OF
SUCCESS!



WITH TWO RIDERS VANQUISHED, THE
TELL-TALE CLICK OF AN EMPTY CHAMBER
SIGNALED THE END OF THE RIFLE'S
USEFULNESS...AND THE TWO REMAINING
APPARITIONS THUNDERED EVER CLOSER
WITH EACH PASSING SECOND!



HANDLEY WENT TO ONE KNEE, DRAWING HIS COLT AS HE TRIED TO MAKE HIMSELF AS SMALL A TARGET AS POSSIBLE. THE PISTOL'S RANGE DEMANDS THAT THE ATTACKER BE DANGEROUSLY CLOSE...



HANDLEY TENSED, TRYING TO FOCUS! THE FINAL SPECTER WAS UPON HIM AND, SQUINTING THROUGH PAIN-CLOUDED EYES, HANDLEY FIRED HIS LAST LOADS...



SUDDENLY ALL WAS SILENT...THE SMELL OF SULFUR FROM THE EXPENDED GUNPOWDER FILLED THE SUN-DRENCHED AIR. HANDLEY FELT ALL THE STRENGTH GO FROM HIS LIMBS...



HANDLEY BECAME AWARE OF THE GIRL MOVING AROUND THE CAMPFIRE. HIS LEG HURT, BUT NOT NEARLY AS MUCH AS BEFORE. THE SHAFT WAS GONE.



LAY QUIETLY, HANDLEY. YOU WILL BE ABLE TO TRAVEL SOON! THEY WILL NOT LOOK FOR YOU HERE...YOU ARE SAFE! WHITE MEN NEVER COME TO THIS PLACE!



THE GIRL PLACED HER DELICATE FINGER TO HANDLEY'S LIPS. SHE MOVED CLOSE TO HIM AND HE FELT HER WARMTH DRAPE OVER HIM. HER LIPS PRESSED CLOSE TO HIS CHEEK...



WHAT A FIND! DOESN'T LOOK LIKE HE WAS KILLED...LOOKS LIKE HE WENT TO SLEEP AND JUST NEVER WOKE UP! CAMPFIRE, CANTEEN, BLANKETS! AMAZING! MUST HAVE LAID HERE UNDISTURBED FOR OVER A HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FIVE YEARS! AND THE SADDLEBAGS...FILLED WITH MONEY!

HERE'S WHAT'S LEFT OF HIS HORSE...SEEMS OK...THIS IS WAY OFF THE MAIN TRAILS...HE WAS PROBABLY HIDING OUT HERE! MUST'VE JUST DIED IN HIS SLEEP! WELL, IT'S GETTING DARK...LET'S SET UP CAMP OVER HERE. IT'S TOO LATE TO MAKE IT BACK TO TOWN AND I DON'T WANT TO LOSE THIS SITE.



YEAH! I DON'T CARE WHAT THAT OLD INDIAN SAID, WE'RE ONLY GOING TO BE HERE ONE NIGHT!

END