

A Complete
Novelette
of Grisly
Thrills



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turus," "Day of the
Brown Horde," etc.

A tall, commanding form was rising from the shadows

The DUDE RANCH HORROR

CHAPTER I *Hellhounds on the Rim*

BLACK CANYON had been well-named. As I steered the car between the huge, leaning boulders at the gateway, and down the twisting, rock-gored trail to the chasm's bed, the desert night boiled up around me like liquid pitch.

Each jolt of the lurching car rasped my jumpy nerves. The headlights were playing weirdly over a gnarled tracery of mesquite trees—great, bulbous-armed saguaros—rocks like grinning devil idols.

Fighting the steering wheel down the dangerous descent, I could at last appreciate Joe Baxter's closing warning in his letter of a week before:

Whatever you do, Frank, don't come at night! They'll get you sure.

I had laughed at what I thought an attempt to frighten me. But it wasn't funny now. Three hours

before, I had left Wickenburg. The last sign of human handiwork had been a sand-worn guide post, reading: *Rancho Grande 10 Miles*. Ten miles of hellish Arizona road. Grades that melted brake bands or pulled down the engine to a panting whisper of laboring pistons.

I didn't wonder now that Rancho Grande was a popular resort for vacationers who wanted to play cowboy. It was certainly back to the wild!

The car nosed over a hump, dived dizzily into a murky hollow. A rattling, nerve-racking whir burst out of the night almost squarely in my face. A thud on the windshield, and the racket ceased. Only a cicada, I told myself, but it had sounded like a hurtling witch's token.

Then the descent was over. Sooty darkness heaved up at me like an ocean wave as the car leveled off on the sandy, comparatively level bed of Black Canyon.

I threw on the brakes, stopped. I needed a recess for pulling myself together. I let the motor idle while I mopped my face. Ahead, the motionless car

Chilling Wizardry of Black Magic Spreads a Nameless Terror over the Desert Night

lights glared like monster eyes upon a tumbled grotesquerie of the canyon wall.

Poison green clusters of cholla leered at me from the rocks. Squat barrel cacti leaned from the gashed slope, silently intent. I reached down, felt the cold butt of my pistol, lashed to the steering wheel post with the cartridge belt. There was some comfort in the feel of the corrugated rubber.

“They’ll get you sure!” Joe Baxter had written in a strange, cramped hand. He hadn’t been clear as to what. I had scoffed at his odd allusions to something inhuman haunting Rancho Grande.

Ever since Joe and I had gone over the top in France as buddies, I had taken my danger by the horns. But now, as I sat there in the dark car, I wondered if I hadn’t gone too far. Anything could happen in this hellpit of Arizona desert. An army of lunatics could have hidden within a hundred yards of me.

Across the farthest reach of the headlights’ fan something moved silently. I couldn’t believe it at first. The snake-green branches of a dense mesquite shrub were moving there ahead! Without a sound that I could detect, the tree glided across the headlights’ fan. It paused once, as if to look and listen. Then on again, disappearing in the inky border of the night on the left.

Macbeth at Dunsinane flashed to mind. But I didn’t believe in witches and moving forests. I steadied myself grimly and shouted out the car window, “Who’s there!”

“Who’s there!” The boulders flung back a startling shriek, like a clammy slap in the face.

I thought of my pistol, considered an attempt to bluff whoever was out there behind that moving tree. But I couldn’t bring myself to act. I sensed something in those rocks beyond ordinary understanding. Something was staring at me from that inferno of nocturnal shapes—something not right.

THE motor coughed and died. An eerie stillness rang in my ears. My hand quivered as I clawed at the tightly-set brake lever. I wanted to get away from those devilish eyes that were watching from the night.

My foot had just pressed the starter button when a horrible racket smote me from behind. A scream—a roar—something between the two. It couldn’t have been more than ten feet behind the car!

For an instant I was powerless to move. No wild beast could have uttered such a sound, nor any human that I could conceive. I sat helplessly through an eternity of seconds, waiting like a charmed bird before the jaws of a serpent.

Then I became aware that the motor was running. Subconsciously, my foot had finished the pressure on the starter button.

I didn’t dare look back as I shifted gears and roared ahead along the twisting trail. I drove as if a legion of devils pursued me. Rancho Grande couldn’t be more than a few miles farther on. Never before had I craved the sight of human habitation as I did now.

Like dead, brittle bones the dry sage rattled along the bumpers and running boards. Rocks gouged at the tires, thumped the chassis hollowly.

I drove recklessly, yet I could make little speed. Fifteen miles an hour was enough to threaten me with a crash. And I had to hold the road, keep upright, with that thing out there.

Trees that walked and a fiend that shrieked like a monster maniac! There had been something to Joe Baxter’s warning. There was something wrong at Rancho Grande, and I, Frank Morrison, vacationing Los Angeles private detective, was finding it out in the throes of a blinding terror that I’d never dreamed was possible for me.

Ten minutes or more I drove like mad, pedaling the brake, spinning the wheel around hook turns, over ruts that threatened to split the tires. My heart hammered in my throat. I had the hair-raising notion that something was hanging to the back of the car, crawling in to get me.

Directly ahead, as I rounded a sharp turn, a massive, russet brown boulder loomed up across the ruts in the sand. My pulse raced as I stepped on the brake. The front bumpers collided with the ponderous bulge of the rock as I came to a jolting stop.

A landslide had stopped me. But was it an accident? Convenient for someone to stop me now. “They’ll get you sure!” Joe had said.

I could hear my own unsteady breathing as I sat there straining my eyes to either side of the massive obstruction on which the headlights glared. The right was impassable—a yawning arroyo there would stall me. I might make it on the left, over a hump of small boulders.

THERE was a rattle of rubble along the rim above—a trickle of stones and sand like icy fingers tapping at a dark window. My scalp crawled. That hideous scream again! Higher up now, yet directly above.

I yanked my gun from its holster, stuck it through the car window and fired three times at the wall on the right. Red spurts stabbed the night as the rocks gave back splitting echoes.

My trigger finger tensed for another shot, but I held my fire. I'd be a fool to empty my gun now. Listening tensely, I could hear piggish, grunting noises above me. With pistol cocked, I looked out under the edge of the car top.

Faintly I could see the rugged canyon rim above, bulking up against the starlit sky. Something moved up there among the rocks. My blood turned cold as I made out two hulking, grotesquely human heads and shoulders straining at a huge boulder.

One look was enough. They were trying to crush me with an avalanche!

I dropped my gun to the floor of the car, rasped the gears into reverse, backed away from the obstructing rock with engine roaring. I took the detour on the left with a rush. The car rocked and groaned over the rocks, racing in low. I felt the wheels spin once, smelled the stench of burnt rubber. Then, over I went, spinning the wheel wildly to get back on the trail. I struck the foot of the boulder heap with a reeling crash, and as I saw the trail flare up again in the headlights, I heard a hellish rumble behind where the car had stood a moment before. And above the grinding of loosened rocks rose the baffled screaming of the things.

I stamped down on the accelerator as the car righted itself on the trail. The scent of drifting dust and ancient lava ash filled the air. Rocks were bounding down behind me, obliterating the trail. But I shot away out of danger, leaning over the wheel, praying for a smooth stretch of road.

The car leaped and shuddered under me. I came near overturning several times. Then an easier stretch at last. I got the speedometer up to thirty. The worst of the trail was behind me evidently. If those creatures were human at all they could never overtake me again.

The grade began to rise abruptly. The motor was laboring again. I was climbing out of the canyon's grave-like depths. Up and up I wound, past bulging, silent walls of gnarled lava, ghostly

gleaming quartz.

At last the rim!

As I felt the motor pick up with the leveling of the grade, I saw the lights of Rancho Grande directly ahead. And there was the sign with a huge Indian arrow pointing to the gates of Joe Baxter's dude ranch: "Welcome to Rancho Grande."

CHAPTER II

A Challenge to Fear

THE Spanish arches of the patio glowed luminously white as I drove up the palm-walled lane. I glimpsed adobe stables, long, low, many doored. Under the car lights, after what I had seen in Black Canyon, the place looked oddly like a great cemetery.

I stopped the car beside a weird, rock-bordered cactus garden, honked the horn loud and imperatively.

A screen door opened. In the dim light of the veranda, I saw a tall, bent-shouldered figure in white ducks, half-boots, broad-brimmed Stetson. It was Joe Baxter, yet somehow he looked different even then.

He stood staring out at the car with something strangely hesitant in his intentness.

I gulped and called, "Joe!"

The figure jerked into motion, came toward me in long, nervous strides. The boot heels clicked on the flag stones around the cactus garden.

"Frank! Is that you?" Joe's voice was hollow, tense. Not at all the pleasant slow baritone of my old friend.

"What's left of me," I retorted, as steadily as I could.

A shaky laugh froze in my throat as I saw Joe's face in the car window. He was looking at me, through me, like a man bewitched. Joe Baxter was deathly pale. His usual ruddy, cheerful features were drawn and gaunt, as if he hadn't slept for days.

I started a volley of questions, but he cut me off abruptly.

"Never mind now." He glanced behind him nervously. "You've seen enough, by the looks of you. Drive up to a garage and put away your car." He came round and got in beside me. "I told you not to come at night!" he said, irritably. "I don't see how you got through. And no moon either."

I drove on slowly, stunned by Joe's unnatural

behavior. A gay tenor voice was lifted in song as we passed the long veranda. A girl laughed. Someone was strumming a guitar. The merrymaking seemed like sacrilege.

"They don't know yet," Joe was saying in a strained voice. "I hope they never know until we get at the bottom of this damned curse that's hanging over Rancho Grande."

He directed me jerkily to the row of adobe garages where guests left their straight eights for the stock saddles and pintos of Joe Baxter's stables. I stopped the car in a dark, quiet stall.

Joe began to talk nervously.

Several months before, a stranger had come to Rancho Grande. A man who called himself Ishmael Duncan. Joe hadn't liked the fellow's looks. Duncan had claimed to be a mining engineer. He wanted to reopen a mine somewhere in the hills above Black Canyon.

After several long rides alone, Duncan had come to Joe with a ridiculously low offer for the ranch. Joe had laughed at him, said he wouldn't sell for twice that money. Duncan had smiled in an odd way and dropped the subject.

A few days later Duncan had disappeared. Joe had thought nothing of it at the time, assuming that the man had settled on his mine location.

Shortly after that the guest guides of the ranch had reported the sound of blasting in the rugged country above Black Canyon. They hadn't bothered to trace the explosions to their source. The hills were honeycombed with abandoned gold mines; and some optimist was always trying to reopen one, hunting for a lost or petered vein.

THEN the first guest had disappeared. His horse had come in alone after dark, lathered and winded. The animal had been frightened by a bear, they thought, and had thrown its rider. A search was made for the missing guest, but the man was never found.

Later that same week another had disappeared, then a third. Hideous screams were heard on nights when no moon was out.

Joe had begun to worry. Quietly, he instigated searching parties, enlisted the aid of deputies who agreed to say nothing that would alarm the guests or attract unfavorable publicity.

But another tragedy followed in spite of these precautions. A guest who had ridden out alone one evening, returned to the ranch without his horse.

His clothes had been torn half off, his body raked with wounds. On his throat were the marks of teeth that looked oddly human.

That last victim of the unknown horror had been sent to a sanitarium, his brain seriously deranged by an experience so horrible that rational minds could not credit his babbled tale.

"A week later I got a letter from Duncan, postmarked at Wickenburg," Joe continued. "He didn't say much—just repeated his offer for the ranch and named a place and date to close the deal if I agreed." Joe's voice was listless now. "Of course I couldn't agree. It would have meant *giving* the ranch away. But I'll have to close the place to guests if we can't stop these damned things from preying on us. I've just begun to make a real profit, too—it would break me if I had to close the ranch. I'm satisfied this Duncan is at the bottom of the whole hellish business—but we can't find a trace of anything."

His voice trailed off and his hands began working nervously at his knees.

"I thought you were kidding me, Joe," I shuddered. "I'd still think so if I hadn't seen and heard what I did in Black Canyon."

Joe gripped my arm suddenly.

"Maybe I shouldn't ask this of you, Frank," he pleaded, "but you've handled some tough cases in Los Angeles; I want you to see me through. That's why I wrote you to come on your vacation. A hell of a vacation, I grant, but we need you. I've got five deputies on the job now. The guests think they're cowboys. But they haven't found a sign of a clue.

"I think they're all scared stiff, to tell you the truth. I know it's got me and everybody else that knows. I've been counting on you, Frank—hoping the damned things won't get your goat like they have the rest of us."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked.

He sat very still a moment.

"There's a young woman I want you to meet. She came to the ranch a week ago. She claims one of the guests who disappeared was her father. I'm satisfied she knows more than she'll tell about the whole thing. She's looking for a man she can trust—to go with her at night into that devil's nest above Black Canyon. I told her about you. She's waiting."

It didn't take me long to decide. I'd have done anything for Joe Baxter.

“Take me to her, Joe,” I said, shortly.

We got out of the car and walked past the patio. We passed a cowboy headed for the stables. One look at his drawn, stony-eyed face, and I could see that he was marked with the nameless horror I had felt down there in Black Canyon.

In the ranch house living room, Joe spoke to a furtive half-breed *moza*. She slithered out on her moccasined feet, silent as a ghost. A moment later the Navajo curtains parted across the room.

A girl was standing there—a girl who fairly took my breath away.

“Miss Leslie, I want you to meet my friend, Frank Morrison.” Joe introduced us in a dull voice. “He’s the man I told you about. I’ll leave you alone now, if you don’t mind.”

JOE BAXTER shambled out wearily. I felt deep, blue-black eyes searching my six-foot-one of tolerable brawn with a scrutiny that made me a bit uncomfortable. I wondered how my wiry pompadour and pugilist face looked to her.

“So you are the man?” She spoke slowly, tensely.

I hardly heard her voice. She was stunning in gray moleskin riding trousers, calf-fitting boots, a white blouse flared at the neck. Dark hair with a gleam of red in it. Lips that had no business being grim. It was the mute terror lurking in her eyes, her deathly pallor, rigid posture that made her cold as Greek marble. She knew!

She knew far more than the others. I sensed that immediately.

“Do you realize that if you help me you may be sacrificing your life—perhaps even your soul?”

I tried to act nonchalant.

“Risking my life is my job,” I said. “I can’t say I prefer the same old routine on my vacation. But for Joe Baxter—and you—”

One of her strong, tanned hands raised in a tired protest. She had seen the admiration in my eyes. “Please,” she said quietly.

I murmured something apologetic. Her eyes looked through me as if at some spectral visitant behind. Again I felt the cold breath of the terror that haunted Rancho Grande.

“I can’t tell you anything definite—now,” she began in a forcibly steadied voice. “You wouldn’t believe me if I did. I suppose Mr. Baxter has told you why I came here—that my father was one of the missing guests. Benedict Leslie was his name. I

am his daughter, Avis.”

I tried to study her as if she were a man. It was hard.

“You want me to help you find—his body?” I suggested.

She tried to speak, but her throat contracted as livid terror leaped into her eyes. My hands clenched on the arms of my chair as the possible import of her reaction struck me.

“You mean your father may be one of those things I saw tonight on the rim of Black Canyon?” I demanded, aghast.

Her eyes were looking through me icily as she answered so faintly I could barely hear.

“Yes—I believe Father is alive—alive as *they* are. And I must bring him back before it’s too late—drag him back if necessary. Oh, I know I can save him with the help of a man I can depend on.”

“And I am to ask no questions if I agree to help?”

“No—you want to leave everything to me,” she affirmed, as one pronouncing a death sentence. “I have a plan. If you knew—even a little—you might make a disastrous mistake.” Her eyes pleaded. “Mr. Baxter said you were the man for me. I believe you are. I trust you. I know I can see us through—get us back alive—and Father, too.”

“I want to do all I can, but—”

“Then you’ll go,” she said exultantly. “You’ll go out there tonight with me—*unarmed*, obeying my orders strictly?”

“Unarmed! Why?” My flesh crawled in horror at the suggestion.

“Because it’s our only chance to get through to my father. I’m the only one here with the necessary knowledge to cope with these creatures. I know certain secrets”—she broke off, then added as one who narrowly eludes an indiscretion—“and when we find their hiding place they can be destroyed.”

“What do you mean—secrets?” I asked. “Am I a prospective victim of the body snatchers that have been preying on Rancho Grande?”

“Then you *are* afraid!” she challenged, a flash of contempt in her eyes.

“Yes,” I admitted. “I’m afraid, but I can take care of myself. I’ll see this through for Joe Baxter and you. But I warn you, Miss Leslie. If you aren’t playing square—”

HER eyes met mine evenly. I was sorry for what I had said. She looked at me like a soul

in torment, begging to be believed and helped.

“Tonight, then—now!” she cried, exultantly, fiercely almost.

I murmured assent. She ran to the curtains across the room, called through.

“Mr. Baxter! We leave tonight. May we have the horses right away?”

Joe came in a moment. A word of protest seemed trembling on his taut lips. But he didn’t say anything. He turned abruptly and hurried out.

I looked out through a window in the thick, adobe walls. The desert night seemed alive with whispers of the mysteries it held. I might be a fool to do this, but I was glad, somehow, that I had agreed to help Avis Leslie.

She came up to me so silently that I started at her cool touch on my shoulder. She held something up in the palm of one ivory white hand. It was an ebony cross, the horizontal bar near the base of the stem instead of near the top.

Her voice was a tense whisper.

“Do you know what this means?”

I groped vainly among dim, disquieting memories. “No,” I faltered, finally. “I can’t say I do. What is it?”

She thrust the thing into her blouse with a suddenness almost furtive, as if vastly relieved at my abysmal ignorance.

“So much the better,” I heard her murmur.

The screen door opening from the verandah startled us. It was Joe Baxter, announcing that the horses were waiting. He looked more than ever like a man from the grave—a ghost master of bewitched, accursed Rancho Grande.

I wanted to pinch myself to make sure that this was not some nightmare from which I would awaken to find myself pinned under my wrecked car somewhere in Black Canyon.

CHAPTER III

Dark Quest

I WALKED out of the ranch house into the cool night air with Avis Leslie like a man stalking to a gallows doom. The horses stood champing their bits restlessly, ears quiveringly erect. They seemed to know what was in the wind.

A man in cowboy regalia held the bridles. He looked pale and grim. *He knew!*

“He’s a deputy,” Joe Baxter said in a low, tired voice. “We’ll have a posse in the hills. A signal fire

anywhere high up will bring us on the run. But you’ve got to depend on the girl at first. God help us if she isn’t playing square. Good luck, Frank.”

I mumbled something to express a confidence I didn’t feel, and gripped Joe’s hand. Avis Leslie was already in the saddle. I took the reins of my mount and forked on.

Joe Baxter and the deputy were looking off intently into the night as I rode away at a jog behind Avis.

We rode for some time in silence. I kept close watch of my guide. She kept looking intently ahead, following a bridle path that wound away through the starlit desert. Weird, monstrous, armed giant cacti ranged about, like giant mummies. An owl hooted dismally. The rank pungence of greasewood prickled in my nostrils like the odor of an ancient tomb.

“So Ishmael found a place at last,” I heard Avis muttering to herself. “Oh, Dad, Dad! How could they get you away from me—after we—” Her voice trailed off as if she had become aware she was talking aloud.

We climbed a long grade, through tumbled, ochre knobs of rock, looming like great headstones. The scent of pines joined the dry, spicy desert smells. We were heading into the uplands north of Black Canyon.

Once I thought I saw a shadowy, bent figure skulking along on the right from bush to bush.

“They don’t come out in the moonlight,” Avis was saying. “Their eyes are like a bat’s.”

That was the last I heard from her before we reached the first scattered clumps of pine and spruce. As we wound around the base of a great pyre of black rocks, I could see the lights of Rancho Grande twinkling below.

The horses grew uneasy as we climbed higher. A black shape flitted past my face. I beat at the thing with a flaying hand that encountered only air.

I was certain now that a dark, hulking form was stealing along on the left.

“There!”

The word was a gasp from Avis Leslie’s lips. I could see her face dimly, a blob of white against the somber wall of the pines. She was looking off to the left, her head flung up, like some startled wild thing.

I knew, or thought I knew, what was coming when my horse snorted and reared. From the shadows to right and left and ahead burst a wolfish

chorus of those screams that had frightened me in Black Canyon. Lustful exultation was in their timbre now.

Avis Leslie was managing her plunging mount like a man. I could see the grim line of her set lips.

Again those screams broke out nearer. We were surrounded without a doubt. This was how the victims had been taken, I thought. Thrown from unmanageable horses, or pulled off by clawed hands. And now we were confronting the same unknown fate.

I saw Avis Leslie slip one hand into her blouse and snatch out that black, inverted cross she had shown me at the ranch. High over her head she held it, like a sword or a magic talisman. At that instant a cry broke from her lips that I could scarcely believe she had uttered.

"*Ave Satan!*" her voice cleaved the stillness with a brazen shrillness. "*Ave Satan, brothers!*"

MY horse quivered on trembling legs. All around us dark forms were rising, running in, cutting off all possible retreat, unless we fought our way out. Cowled, black-robed creatures, hunched, misshapen. One seized my horse's bit; others were surrounding Avis. Still she held high that black, inverted cross.

"*Ave Satan, sister of the blood!*" I heard a raucous voice call gloatingly.

I wanted to drive my fists into the face of the monster that held my horse. But I held myself rigidly motionless. I must leave everything to Avis—until I knew she had failed. I didn't want to consider that. These were men—men twisted by frightful monstrosity. Unconscionable lusts reddened their sunken, piggish eyes.

Avis was speaking. I marveled at her bold, steady tone.

"Brothers of the Blood, we come as proselytes of the Black Faith. We would see the Master, pay homage to him. You see the sign I bear?"

There were a dozen or more gathered about us now.

At Avis' bold words they grunted a weird jargon amongst themselves. Their black-cowled heads bobbed and peered, first at me, then at Avis. I caught phrases of what seemed a mongrel Latin. One turned to Avis, looked up at her owlily. The loose lips spread over yellowish teeth in a feline grimace.

"So you would see the Master? He will be glad.

A virgin, eh? But you will serve if the worst is true. The Black One is not so particular."

At the crude jest a babble arose like damned souls speaking a confusion of tongues. And then a chorus of the maddest laughter I had ever heard. There seemed some hideous joke that I couldn't fathom. It struck a new fear to my bones—fear for this girl who had braved this heathen horde by night to save her father's life—or his soul!

"Off your horse, infidel!" a voice snarled.

"Do as he says," Avis whispered.

Harsh hands dragged at me eagerly as I obeyed. Avis, too, dismounted. Our horses' heads were turned back toward the ranch. Horny hands slapped their rumps. A chorus of wild yells broke out as our frightened mounts fled back to the ranch. We were at the mercy of these monkish vultures of the desert night.

The hoof beats of the horses died away. I felt horny fingers feeling over my clothes. Searching me for a weapon evidently. I didn't know whether to be glad or sad that I had done as Avis requested—left my gun in the car at the ranch. A length of rope was hitched about my arms, lashing them to my sides.

"Trust me—and pray," Avis Leslie said so low that the creatures could not hear.

A death march began under the stars, through the solemn pines. Two that were alive among these things that seemed half dead. Men of flesh only were our captors—men without souls or with gross caricatures of souls.

A peculiar odor emanated from their coarse garments. Something goat-like. They were coarsely, ferociously alive—these half-men that stalked jerkily along beside us. I noticed one's loose lips slavering. He looked at my throat with unholy desire in his fishy eyes.

"God forgive me if I fail," Avis whispered presently. "But we swear by Satan from now on. Remember!"

I don't know what I answered. My thoughts were a jumble of dread and conjecture. Who were these human devils in their cloister garb?

Satan! Swear by Satan, Avis Leslie had said. What in heaven's name could it all mean?

CHAPTER IV
The Black God's Altar

FOR an hour or more we wended a devious way through the dark, pine-shrouded ravines, closely guarded by twelve gibbering wretches. Horses could not have followed in our tracks, not even burros. I could see what they were about—deceiving us as to the route. They weren't trusting Avis Leslie that we were confirmed proselytes, whatever that meant. All I knew as to our location was that we were somewhere north of Black Canyon.

We reached a deep ravine that widened gradually into a wild canyon. Avis was quiet; I could feel the hard tenseness of her body as she brushed against me occasionally. She hadn't broken yet.

Heaps of mine-tailings loomed up, dotted with desert weeds. Dark shafts opened here and there in the rocks and brush. Our muttering escorts jerked us to the left, up the steep incline of the canyon wall.

A black cavity ahead. Straight into the hole, which must once have been a mine shaft, we were led, clawed hands locked on our arms.

I heard Avis gasp and choke in the close air of the cavern. A faint putrid odor filled the air. Fifty yards or more we were led underground through dense darkness. Then a gleam of light ahead, the sound of heavy voices lifted in a strange, unholy chant.

Avis Leslie walked on with the imperiousness of a queen. If she doubted her strength to cope with these human brutes she did not show it. I fought down a sickening dread.

We came out of the dark passage into a huge chamber, hewn from solid rocks. Scars of dynamite drills gashed the walls. Metal torches, oddly wrought, so ancient they were green, burned smokily along the walls at intervals. A score of the cowlled creatures were gathered before an altar at the far end of the room—an altar weird as a Druid dolmen.

I noticed with a chill of horror dark, gleaming stains on that long, oblong slab of stone. Above the dolmen, standing out like a great, black spider, was a massive, inverted cross of charred wood, a mammoth replica of Avis Leslie's talisman!

"*Ave Satan!*" our captors cried, arms raised to the black cross. "We bring proselytes, oh Master!"

The mongrel assembly before the altar raised a fearful clamor at sight of us. In the flickering torchlight of the underground shrine it was as if a consort of Satan himself had welcomed us.

But a tall, commanding form was rising from the shadows between the cross and the altar dolmen. Never had I looked upon a face so utterly evil. The gleaming, sunken eyes glared out under a forehead like that of a withered skull. A nose like a vulture's beak hooked over lips wasted and sere. Clad also in a cord-belted black robe, I could see but one difference from the others in his habit. On his sunken breast appeared the ghastly silhouette of a human skull.

One skinny hand stretched toward us from the spectral form of the one addressed as the Master. Taloned hands nudged us forward.

Avis Leslie held up the miniature black cross. Her voice trembled a little as she cried:

"*Ave Satan!* Ishmael—Master, we have come to join you as brothers of the blood."

ISHMAEL. So this skull-branded archfiend was Ishmael Duncan! I did not wonder that Joe Baxter had thought him queer. His lips writhed in a crafty smile as he spoke in a cracked, grating voice.

"A likely story, Avis Leslie. You, the angel of the false God, who prevented the conversion of your father, Benedict, so many years—now you would come with a young lion whelp as proselyte." He rubbed his dark-veined hands caressingly. "It is well. We shall see."

"You have won my father," Avis pleaded. "I ask only to be near him. I will take the oath of allegiance to the Black God, and I will vouch for my friend, Frank Morrison."

Guttural exclamations broke out around us. There was a commotion among the creatures that pressed about. One broke away from the others. He stumbled up to Avis, ignoring the wrath of the Master at the interruption.

"Avis, my daughter! Why, in God's name, did you come here?"

There was something still sane in this one's voice and features. I could see a faint resemblance to Avis in the twisted face. Her father! Benedict Leslie, the man we had come to rescue from his enslavement to these mad fanatics of a hell-born creed. A dim hope rose in me.

"Father! I wanted to be with you!" Avis sobbed. Her arms went round that black-cowlled head.

Over her shoulder I could see Benedict Leslie's features writhing with the soul torments of the damned. A last shred of decency struggling in him against the hypnotic spell of these demon priests. His daughter's awful risk in his behalf had brought him back to sanity and remorse.

"Brother Leslie!" The Master's voice cracked like a slave whip.

Avis' father cringed at the command. His arms slipped away from his daughter. He turned to that spectral form above the altar, crossed himself reversely, muttering:

"Master, I obey."

"Your actions are unseemly for a true acolyte of the Black Prince, Brother Leslie," the Master snarled. "Get thee to penance. I shall attend to your daughter."

Quite suddenly he turned to me. I felt black, evil eyes boring into my brain, searching my very soul.

"Well, my friend, you have a remarkable resemblance to Sir Galahad—too much, I fear, for promise as a slave of the Black Prince. But what have you to say for yourself?"

"I came with this woman—to join you," I lied loyally, though beads of horror's sweat stood out on my brow.

"By whom do you swear?"

"By Satan," I answered, remembering Avis' last injunction.

For seconds that raised the hair on my head, those evil eyes studied me. All the evil in hell seemed steaming up from that gaunt shape above the dolmen. I knew now what we had fallen into.

Devil worshippers! Slaves of Satan, the Black God, with all the tenets of Christianity reversed!

Ishmael Duncan spoke again. The insidious undertone of menace maddened me.

"Perhaps you bring word from Joseph Baxter? Perhaps he is ready to meet my terms for Rancho Grande?"

I wanted to leap at that scrawny, vulture throat as I answered.

"He can't sell at such a figure. It would be giving the ranch away. And if you think you can force him out with these atrocities you're badly mistaken."

That last slipped out before I could catch myself. I heard Avis groan.

The Master's brows drew back. His snag teeth bared at the affront.

"So you would be a Brother of the Blood?" he

sneered. "You lie and the girl lies. Both of you shall pay. Did you think to deceive me—Ishmael, Master of the Brotherhood? I read your thoughts. Fools! You would have taken Brother Benedict from us, but instead you have supplied a much needed want."

He swung a long, robe-winged arm in a furious gesture. "Away with him, brethren! Let him wait his time in the pit. Will he not look well with a pot over his head?"

A burst of exultant laughter was the response. I struggled vainly at the ropes pinning my arms. A dozen powerful hands crushed into my flesh, carrying me almost bodily away from the shrine.

"Avis!" I called, desperately, as they dragged me away.

Her white face was turned to me. I saw despair in her dark, wide eyes. Her lips moved with words I could not hear—words of regret or awakening terror.

Then I was stumbling along in the darkness of the passage by which we had entered the shrine. I heard Avis scream once as a savage chant sounded behind.

CHAPTER V

The Chamber of Skulls

A CURVE in the cavern wall shut off the light from the shrine when I was jerked to a halt. A door creaked ponderously before me. Brute hands shoved me forward. I plunged down on hard rock, helpless to catch myself with my arms tied to my sides. Stunned a little, I lay still. A heavy door closed with a muffled shock behind me. I could hear a ponderous sliding noise as of a bolt settling in its slots.

I choked at the reek that rose about me as I stirred. The stench of a charnel house clogged my nostrils. All was still and dark. I could hear the hiss of my own breathing.

For minutes I did not move. It was all clear now, damnably clear.

Ishmael Duncan, chief priest of a cult emerging from the bloody womb of the Dark Ages, had sought sanctuary in these trackless, desert hills—sanctuary for the unholy rites of his demon order. One by one he had brought his priests to the abandoned mine. Here they could prey with minimum danger of the law's interference. They had terrorized Joe Baxter and his men, conjuring a

supernatural screen for their deviltries. Of course Ishmael Duncan wanted Rancho Grande! In charge of a priest of the order, disguised as a normal man, the victims could be trapped with even more certainty of escaping justice.

Now Avis had apparently failed to deceive Duncan as to our motives in that daring visit to the shrine. I could imagine what would happen to her. A virgin's flesh. A virgin's blood. As for me—that last remark of the Master's burned in fiery letters before my gloom-blind eyes. "Will he not look well with a pot over his head?" Putting a pot over the head of a victim—an ancient cannibal rite. The pot in which the human flesh was boiled.

I writhed frantically, straining against my bonds. My violent contortions pressed my face against something cold, brittle. Something with round hollows, sharp-lined fissures. My cheek was branded by the impress of the thing. I knew what it was as I writhed back with a hoarse cry of horror. A human skull, a fleshless skull!

I heard the rattle of dislodged bones as a hideous, invisible thing collapsed from the shock of my struggles. Was this what remained of those vanished guests from Rancho Grande? Now I knew why the odor of dead flesh befouled the darkness. The bones were not dry! Remnants of stripped flesh remained—grisly refuse of the Black God's gruesome feast!

But worse than this was in store for Avis Leslie! The thought of the torments to which she might even now be subjected steeled me to the horrors of that chamber of skulls.

I struggled to my feet. Bones crunched underfoot. Skulls rolled clattering away from my blundering strides. The place was filled with skeletons. If I could only see! Death in the light couldn't madden one like death in the dark.

Gradually I got command of myself. I tested my bonds, started to work my arms loose. It didn't take me long when I set all my strength to the task.

When the last strand of rope was beaten off over my head, I began to examine the walls of my cell. Hard rock at first—the sides of an old mine shaft. I reached the door, felt over it. Ponderous, rough-hewn slabs formed the panels; I had heard the heavy bar fall into its grooves outside.

The room wasn't large. I reached crude corners that shunted me through the dark at right angles.

At last my groping hands encountered something—one side of the place was formed of

mine props, set close together. These rock roofs required no such support. There must be a passage of some sort on the other side of the timbers. The wood was old. Rotten fibers broke loose under my clawing ringers. My wrists were powdered with dust. I might be able to break through.

DRAWING back, I gathered myself. I shoved into the ancient timbers. None gave at first. I kept on pounding at them with a shoulder, moving from one to another along the wall. At last I felt one of them shudder and give. Dust showered me. I turned and ripped at the weakened timber with my bare hands.

A huge knot broke loose. When the last of the dry rot came away only a thin upright remained. I beat at it with my boot heels, flung my shoulder against it, regardless of bruises and cuts. It gave.

One last frantic heave and I went through head foremost into a dark cavity.

I lay still listening. I thought I heard faint sounds somewhere ahead, a subdued murmur of voices. Groping about, I discovered that the passage slanted upward, the roof low, walls wide apart. A stope undoubtedly. Miners had followed a lead vein here, then walled up the passage. I started crawling up the incline, head bumping on the hard rock roof.

It was the mutter of voices I had heard. The sounds were louder now. The stope led up abruptly, growing steeper and steeper. I tore at the rocks with ragged nails. I felt no pain.

There must be an opening ahead. Voices couldn't penetrate solid rock. The stope was a mere horizontal slit by this time. I could barely squeeze through. The horror of being pinned helpless underground seized me for an instant. But I kept on. I'd rather die here in the darkness than have my veins drained on that damned, black-stained altar.

I could make out the syllables of a wild chanting. Latin phrases and something else—a weird, unwritten jargon. An argot created by the devil-priests to guard the secrets of their vile order. It must be coming from the altar room.

The stope heightened a little. I crawled on faster, slithering over the cold rocks. A glimmer of light, then a steady glow straight ahead—a long ragged slit of lurid light!

I slowed down. Inch by inch I hauled myself along the stope toward the rent of light. I was in the breach now; my lungs sucked greedily at air less

tainted, as I thrust my face cautiously into the open.

My eyes blurred. Then the whole scene blazed before me, hideously vivid. I had come out on the wall of the altar room, just under the jagged rocks of the ceiling. Twenty feet below was the floor of the devil shrine.

A chill of horror knifed me as I saw more than a score of the black-robed fanatics kneeling before the altar. And roped to the dark-stained dolmen under the black cross lay Avis Leslie. Her clothes were stripped away from her, her head hung over the head of the sacrifice stone.

Over her stood Ishmael Duncan, invoking the god he worshipped. His gaunt arms were raised; a glare of insane ecstasy burned in his cavernous eyes.

I could not move. I wanted to scream. I wanted to fling myself down among them, pounding their gluttonish faces until I died. But I could not move. My fingers crushed into the rocks till the nails bled afresh.

At intervals the priests responded to the Master's invocation. Avis Leslie's white throat seemed to throb visibly. Her tumbled hair framed a face deathly white. She must have fainted, I thought.

The fiends were on their feet. They were crossing themselves reversely. Their voices rose in a chant with passages in English. Suddenly I knew what they were repeating. It was a fulsome blasphemy on their leprous lips. The Lord's prayer from end to beginning!

"Ever and forever, glory Thee, and power Thee, kingdom is Thine."

The prayer of Satan's converts, the mad defiance of men sworn to the religion of evil.

Almost unconsciously my eyes fell to the watch at my wrist.

Midnight!

I was witnessing a hellish heritage of that terror of the ancients, the Black Mass!

CHAPTER VI

Demon's Communion

A LONG, curved knife flashed in the bony hand of Ishmael Duncan. The sacrifice knife! A feverish lust glowed up in that mummy-skinned face. The red lips seemed to drip and drool as he looked down at the throbbing throat of his victim.

The voices of the priests rose higher. The knife

flashed out at the end of a black-draped arm. The acolytes were shuffling forward eagerly. They were extending oddly fashioned goblets—goblets of gruesomely blackened silver. Those cups were weird caricatures of the Holy Grail, cup of the Last Supper. Was there no end to their heathen perversion of everything holy?

This was the communion of devil worshippers, the communion drunk in virgin's blood. I prepared to swing down among them from the shadowy aperture where I lay. I could at least die fighting to prevent this desecration of Avis' flesh.

Just then I heard footsteps from the shadows behind the huddled priests. A dark-robed figure ran out along one wall of the shrine, under the torches. As the man's features were lighted, I recognized Avis' father. There was a mad light in Benedict Leslie's eyes, but a different kind of madness than I had first seen there. A father's frenzied concern for the life, the honor, of his child!

The desperate folly he contemplated was clear as I saw what he carried in one hand. A bundle of drab, mealy sticks. Dynamite, short fused—enough to rock a mountain to the ground.

I saw him seize a torch from the wall. He crouched as if to spring upon the lustful mob at the altar. His voice rang out like the scream of a dying man.

"Stop! Fiends, murderers! Stop, I say, before I blast you all to the black heavens of the god you worship!"

In their ghoulish intentness upon consummation of the sacrifice, the priests had not heard Benedict Leslie's stealthy approach. With yells of rage they turned to face that menacing figure against the wall. The torch swayed perilously near to the short fuses. Howls of dismay arose from the priests. Stark terror bulged their eyes. Here was a threat of death more terrible than their most morbid fancies could conceive.

I looked at the Master. The expression on his face defied description. He stood as if mummified, the sacrifice knife still in hand, poised over the pulsing throat. For long seconds he glared at the defiant figure of the rebel priest. Then his voice woke snarling echoes in the gloomy vault of the shrine.

"Traitor! You shall suffer exorcism for this. You know well the price of treason to the Black Faith—to be drawn and quartered alive! On your face, slave! Down, before I strike you to the living

death with the power vested in me as a prophet of the Black One.”

The answer was laughter. Laughter of a man not afraid to die, nay, eager to die. Benedict Leslie swayed and rocked with mad laughter, while that volcano of potential destruction hovered nearer the licking flames of the torch. Suddenly, then, he was silent. His form stiffened to imperious mien. With scorn and defiance he spoke:

“Ishmael Duncan, you will never live to torture me with your hellish punishments. You seduced my soul to your damnable faith, but before you touch the flesh of my daughter in the Black Mass, I’ll blow you and all your slaves to hell where you belong.”

IT WAS a battle of wills now. For seconds that were a maddening eternity of suspense, the Master fought the will of Benedict Leslie with his terrible eyes. Taloned hands reached out as if to pluck the eyes from the face of the challenger. But Benedict Leslie could not be shaken. He mocked the Master openly through the silent battle of wills; he laughed at the torrent of blasphemous abuse that finally flooded from Ishmael Duncan’s lips.

When the tirade was ended and the Master reeled exhausted by his own unbridled fury, Avis’ father commanded in tones more compelling than those his former Master had been able to summon:

“Release my daughter at once! Release her—or die with me as I set the torch to this dynamite.”

The priests turned uncertainly to the altar. And then I found voice at last.

“Hold them!” I shouted, exultantly.

The sound of my voice stunned the priests. They cowered, looking up, as if in the presence of an avenging angel. Benedict Leslie stared at me in amazement. A glad light suffused his face as he caught sight of me.

Then I went over the edge of the stope in a shower of stones. I hung a moment by my fingers and let go. I landed squarely on both feet. But my legs were stunned by the long drop. I stumbled toward the altar, clumped past the awestruck priests toward the sacrifice slab.

I leaped up at the Master, glaring defiantly into his face as I seized the knife from his stiffened hand. His face was gray with fear as I turned and slashed at the ropes that lashed Avis to the block.

In a moment she was free. I heard her moan deliriously, “Father, Father,” as I snatched her up in

my arms and ran for the tunnel leading to the shrine.

“Take her away while I hold them!” I heard Benedict Leslie shout as I reeled into the dark maw of the passage to the outer air.

Avis swung limply in my arms. She struggled a little as the lights faded out behind.

“Don’t take me away!” she moaned. “Let me die with him. Oh, Dad, Dad!”

I paid no attention to her pleas. My lungs labored, my legs ached as I staggered on with Avis in my arms.

At last she wriggled out of my grasp. I held her hand to be sure she would not break away, run back in her madness of concern for her father.

But she ran with me willingly now. She seemed to realize that this was the only way, that her father could keep Duncan’s slaves at bay until we escaped, then follow later.

“They’re all at the altar except the guard at the entrance in the canyon,” Avis panted. “I heard them call the roll for the Black Mass.”

ICOULD see starlight ahead. A cowed face loomed up between me and freedom. That form looked like a shade from hell. I rushed at the glaring eyes, tore at a startled, yellow face. Horny hands grappled at my throat. I smashed into the devilish face with drumming fists. The thing went down. Avis dragged me away as I hammered at a bloody, pulpy mass with a stone.

Then the sweet, pine-scented air of the canyon. There was no one in sight as we scrambled down the wall. Avis had said that all but the one at the entrance had been at the shrine—and that one would never haunt Rancho Grande again. I had seen to that.

Suddenly, just as we reached the bed of the canyon, while we swayed to overcome the momentum of our headlong plunge down the rocks, the cliff behind us seemed to leap and shudder. A deafening concussion threw us off our feet. Stones tumbled down. Our ears rang with the smiting violence of the underground blast.

Giddy, groping, I sat up, meeting Avis’ horrified eyes in dawning comprehension.

Benedict Leslie had been as good as his word. He had touched the torch to the thunderbolt with which he held that horde at bay!

In the ringing silence we listened. Stones still trickled down the canyon wall around the mouth of

the shaft. But there was no other sound.

We did not speak. Avis bowed her head. Her shoulders shook with sobs. I waited a little, then lifted her gently to her feet. She clung to me.

“He gave his life to save you—and to atone for whatever part he played in this damnable affair,” I said. “It was splendid.”

“Oh, Dad—Dad,” she whispered. “Can I ever forget?”

“You can tell me about it now,” I muttered. “How did you know about all those things?”

“Father has always been interested—our library is full of books about them. Incantations, sorcery, black magic. ‘What ye greatly fear—’” She broke off. “He wrote me a letter from the Rancho. He had been talking to Ishmael Duncan. The man fascinated and horrified him. He didn’t tell anyone about their conversations—not even that he had seen Duncan—but he wrote me a few things. Hints. So that when he disappeared, I knew—somehow—what had happened. I brought the Crux with me. I memorized the services from an old book I found at home. That’s all.”

“But how did you know the exact place?”

“I didn’t. There is no exact place. When I saw the Black Canyon rocks, I knew it must be there somewhere. And I was sure that if I went there openly, I would be seen—and taken to where their meeting place was. I was afraid to go alone. I’m sorry to have dragged you into all this. I hope you can forget it quickly.”

We started on aimlessly down the canyon, away from that silent, deep tomb that Benedict Leslie had blasted out of solid rock in an instant. There was no need to investigate, I thought. Only a miracle could have saved even one of the priests from that cataclysmic explosion. Even the shrine must now be buried beneath tons of stone, never to be exhumed.

I recalled Joe Baxter’s last words. I climbed a high knob and built a huge signal fire to call the posse that Joe had said would be watching and waiting.

Avis sat with me in the circle of the cheering blaze. My arm stole about her, and she didn’t resist. Then I knew that some day I might help her forget, for in her tearful eyes upturned to mine was a solemn promise.

Next Month’s Headliners

HARVEST OF DEATH, By FRANK BELKNAP LONG
HALFWAY TO HORROR, By RAY CUMMINGS
I LOVE THE DEAD, By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS
KURDA’S CORRIDOR, By ARTHUR J. BURKS