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NOVELETS

THE SCREEN GAME

By *J. G. Ballard* 6

LET THERE BE NIGHT

By *Robert F. Young* 68

SHORT STORIES

THE WOLF WOMAN (Fantasy Classic)

By *H. Bedford-Jones* 30

KING SOLOMON'S RING

By *Roger Zelazny* 49

THE MATING SEASON

By *Wilton G. Beggs* 99

A NIGHT WITH HECATE

By *Edward W. Ludwig* 110

FEATURES

EDITORIAL 5

COMING NEXT MONTH 124

ACCORDING TO YOU 126

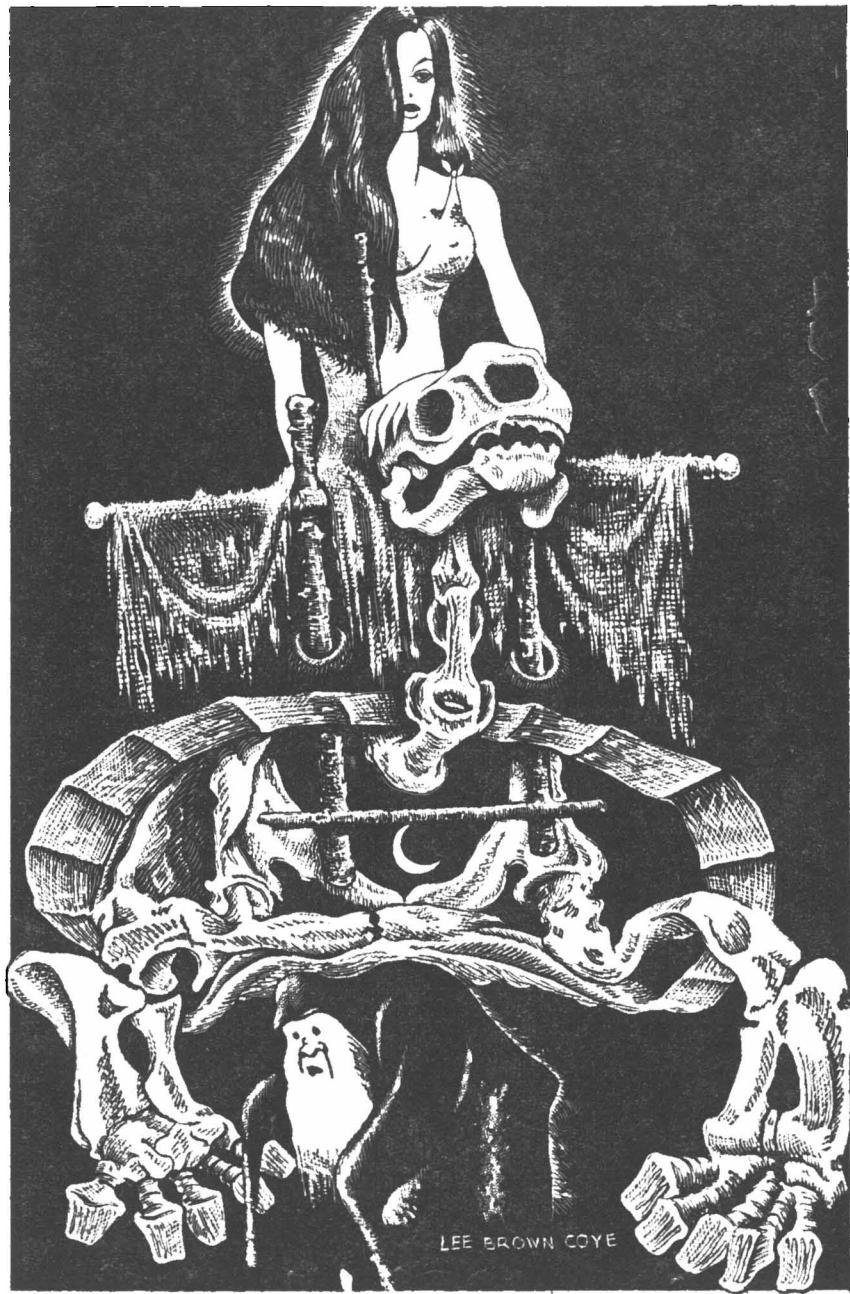
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LEE BROWN COYE

*In the pre-dawn hours the old man
scoured the city to find a wor-
shipper for the goddess he loved.*

a NIGHT with HECATE

By EDWARD W. LUDWIG

SHE awoke slowly, as if from a thousand-year sleep. Out of the dark vacuity of consciousness came the single thought:

"I am alive. I still exist."

She tried to open her eyes, but her eyelids were frozen shut. She tried to open her mouth in anticipation of speech. Her lips seemed fused and as dry as ancient, sun-baked leather.

Out of the black silence came a voice, a humming-bird drone, far away:

"Awake, mighty Hecate . . . oh, gods of wind, fire and pain . . . by the heart of Astaroth, the tongue of Asmodius, awake . . . *per vota nostra, ipse nunc surgat nobilis dicatus Hecate!*"

The muted words of the chant were as tiny fingers of warmth touching the witch-goddess, dispelling the clouds of forgetfulness. The fingers seemed to caress her face, opening her dark, black-browed eyes, giving softness and warmth to red, sensuous lips.

She became aware of a soft breeze stirring the midnight blackness of her long hair, brushing it across the clear, white flesh of face and throat. The breeze teased at the edges of her frail robe. The garment, as delicate and light as a veil of fog, fluttered back to her shoulders so that moonlight fell upon the whiteness of her full breasts and naked body.

The voice cried, "Hecate, beautiful Hecate! You are here!"

"Yes, my children—at last."

She sucked the cold night air deep into her lungs. How wonderful it was! The familiar summons, the joyous awakening, the thrill of the magic moon and the dark sea of worshipping faces; then the wine, the throbbing beat of drums, the lusty dancing, the frenzied chants, and—most wonderful of all—Love.

"You are more beautiful than ever," said the voice, reverently. "In all the universe there is none as lovely as you."

She closed her eyes, smiling, letting the words echo through her consciousness. She stretched her arms above her head, basking in the joy of feeling alive. Then she brought her hands down, ever so slightly, over naked waist, long firm thighs, smooth white knees. She was aware of the rapid rise and fall of her breasts.

She opened her eyes, still smiling.

"Thank you, my children. I—"

She stopped, her tongue frozen. Her slow gaze fell to the clearing which should have held a choked sea of eager faces.

There was but a single face. Just one.

It was that of old Martin. He was a sparrow-faced little man, his shaggy gray hair tumbling over his wizened features as he

knelt before the stone altar.

She remembered. Suddenly she felt very old and very weary.

I had forgotten, she thought. I had forgotten that I am alone. It is the year 1997, and I am alone. . . .

DESPITE the grief that had welled up within her, she held her head high.

"Beautiful Hecate," came Martin's soft voice, "you are sad. Are you angry with me?"

Her slender body lost some of its stiffness. "No, not angry. But I do not understand your people. I do not understand why they let the old gods die."

As she spoke, a dark procession of lost faces marched through her mind. Great Dagon, lovely Diana, beautiful Venus, swift Hermes, mighty Zeus. How strong they had once been!

But those who worshipped the *other* Master had come with their holy water and their crucifixes and their edicts. Then, and by far the worst, had come the doubters, spewing forth cold logic to prove that the Elder Gods could not exist. The entire Earth had been washed with logic. It had been soaped, brushed and toileted and laid to dry in sterile sunlight.

The Elder Gods had died like leaves on an October tree, falling one by one—for without believers they could not exist.

Now only she—and the King himself, the Master of Darkness—remained.

Hecate's sad eyes turned to the sparrow-faced man. "You're a poet, Martin. You understand men. How did it happen? Why did men stop believing?"

The old man shrugged. "Perhaps my people became old. They lost their fear of the night. They told their children there was nothing to fear in a darkened room, and they lost their power to imagine. They put equations on pieces of paper and they made microscopes and telescopes. And whatever could not be explained by the equations, whatever could not be seen through the microscopes and telescopes, was cast out, ignored, explained away."

He nodded at the sky. "Men made new gods, forgetting the old. There are the new gods—the planets and stars, the silver rockets. Can the wine of Dionysus compete with the challenge of Mars? Can the joy of a Sabbath surpass the thrill of conquering Jupiter's ice seas?"

Hecate shook her dark head. "But we could have given them wealth, immortality, all the ecstasies of Earth. They had no right to forget us. Didn't they know that we can't exist unless they believe in us?"

Martin didn't answer.

"And you," she went on, "why aren't you like the others?"

He scratched the back of his gray, shaggy head. "Perhaps because my father and *his* father worshipped you. I was taught to believe. Too, maybe it's a kind of perverseness—my way of defying a world that has no use for a poet who writes only of ancient things."

Her face softened. She smiled at this helpless, absurd little man. A poet, a maker of dreams, living his feeble existence in a forest cabin. An exile in this drab world of 1997. Yet without his faith, she knew, the darkness would devour her as it devoured a thousand gods and goddesses before her.

SHE raised her face to the full, silver moon. Memory was strong. It was easy to imagine that this was a night of a thousand, two thousand years ago.

Yes, how clear it was! In her mind's vision she could see herself swooping down from the night sky. Behind her would be her monstrous brood—ghoulish Mormo, the poltergeist Ceropis, the thousand-shaped, donkey-footed Empusas.

She could see the steaming cauldron with its hissing hell-broth, with its wondrous odors of lizard and toad and storax and myrrh.

Down, down she would swoop, over the heads of the gape-jawed worshippers, through the swirl-

ing smoke, past the black-robed priests and their shrine of laurel boughs, across the chalked pentagram and to the great stone throne.

Then the shouting, the howling, the dancing! The wild rhythm of skin-drums, louder and louder, like a chorus of thunderous heart-beats surging up from the Earth.

The occasional figures, edging away from the light of the fire and lifting heads of silhouetted black to the full moon. The hurried disrobing, the gestures, the *changing*. Suddenly the beast howl, rising above the drum rhythms and the shrieking voices. Then the swift beast movements and the skittering away into the night.

More chants, more incantations. The hurling of rainbow powers into dancing flame. The stripping of virgins, the screams and laughter, the futile beat of hands, the pulling of soft young bodies into the shadows.

The melting of waxen images. The bleating of a black lamb, the thrust of sharp teeth. The flow of hot crimson into an altar's trench.

Out of the flames, a new arrival! Perhaps laughing Pan, his cloven hoofs tapping to the beat of drums. Perhaps, if the moon were very bright, the greatest of them all! The Master!

Upon such a moment all move-

ment and all sound would cease. Pan and even mighty Hecate would fall prostrate, heads touching the century-worn earth. . . .

Hecate blinked. The vision faded. The priests, the worshippers, the smoke and flame dissolved into forest shadows. The shoutings, the chantings became fragile echoes carried away by the night-breeze, swept like frightened ghosts back to lost and forgotten centuries.

Gone, she thought, gone forever.

SHE became aware that a murmur had fallen over the forest, like the drone of an approaching rocket, far away. Abruptly, it loudened and exploded into a chorus of deep-throated, metallic growls. Vibrations traveled through the ground like invisible legs of great iron spiders. The stone throne trembled.

In the distance, hovering beneath the tree-horizon, was an ever-brightening glow of light.

“Martin! What is it? What’s happening?”

The old man looked apologetically down at his cracked, worn shoes. “This is why I called you. The men from the city are destroying the forest. My house, your throne, the altar—all will be destroyed.”

She choked. “*Why, Martin?*”

“They’re going to build a new rocket port here. The forest, they say, is a waste of space.”

She leaped down from the throne, eyes wild, black a whirling crown of midnight. “When will they be here?”

“V—very soon. Maybe within an hour.”

She spat. “You fool! You should have called me sooner. It’s been weeks since you’ve called me!”

“I was sick, beautiful Hecate, so sick I couldn’t even leave my house. Even when they told me the house would be destroyed—”

“Silence! Without the throne and altar I, too, will be destroyed. I won’t be able to come even when you call me!”

“I—I know.”

She gasped. “Martin, you know I need two things in order to live: love and worship. You must help me find new disciples, men who will believe in me and love me. Only with that faith and love can I live apart from the forest and throne and altar. We must find those disciples now, before sunrise. Do you understand?”

The metallic crunchings grew louder as hungry steel mouths closed over pine and spruce. The light was brighter, rivaling the glow of the moon.

“Did you hear me, Martin? We must find those disciples before sunrise!”

“B—but I’ve tried before to

tell men of your beauty. They won't believe me. They think I'm crazy."

"Tonight I'll go with you. I'll help you. I'll *make* them see my beauty. They'll *have* to worship me."

"But they can't see you. They can neither see nor hear you unless they believe in you."

Her eyes flashed. "Just one disciple, Martin! If I find just one, I'll be stronger, strong enough to live away from the throne, strong enough so that others can see me. Then they, too, will believe. They'll begin to give me love, Martin—the love that only young men can give—and I'll be as I used to be. I can give them gifts, even immortality. Promise them that, Martin! Promise them immortality!"

Martin looked at the hostile glow of light. He shivered before the ripping, crunching sounds of the machines.

"I'll try, beautiful Hecate."

As he spoke, the steel-jawed face of chugging metal monster appeared at the edge of the clearing.

Hecate screamed.

They ran. . . .

THE city was a great, bubbling cauldron of swarming humanity. Its deep canyons blazed with the rainbow brightness of shimmering neon. Its air was heavy with the grumble of silver jet-

mobiles. Overhead, copter-jets swished and darted over the canyon tops like green- and red-eyed bats.

They stumbled through the man-swarm that covered the second-level sidewalk.

"Go where they're unhappy, Martin, where they're dissatisfied."

Martin thought for an instant. "There's a place just a block away. We'll try that first."

Suddenly a coldness and a weariness crept over her. She swayed. "W—wait, Martin. There's something wrong with me."

It was as if a force were sucking the strength and life from her body.

She looked up.

Before her loomed Gothic towers, ornate spires, delicately-stained glass windows. A cathedral. A red-bricked anachronism half-hidden among silver mountains of steel and cement.

She shuddered.

The home of the Unmentionable One. The Great Destroyer of darkness.

There had been a time when she and her brood would have swarmed into a cathedral screeching with evil delight. Now, a single wave of a crucifix, a single drop of holy water would mean oblivion.

"Martin," she breathed, "take me away, please."

The old man squinted at the cathedral and jerked. "I'm sorry. I—I didn't think."

He led her away, stumbling through the fury of flesh, sound and light.

Strength returned to her and, gradually, a sense of satisfaction came to her. She'd caught only a glimpse of the cathedral's interior, but it had appeared empty. A smile touched her moist red lips. Even the Unmentionable One, it seemed, was not doing so well these days.

"Here we are," puffed Martin. "I'm sure we'll find unhappy, lonely people in here."

THE SPACERAT, said the glowing red sign. The outside of the building was painted the dull, deep yellow of decayed teeth. On the swinging door was a caricature of a black rat sitting in a bowl-like spaceship.

They entered.

A quiet semi-darkness met them like the caress of soft hands. Hecate paused, both surprised and pleased. There were those in the city who wanted to escape from the dizzying avalanche of movement and light and sound.

She eyed the men who sat silent at the bar, sipping cool, colored liquids. Yes, she could feel the aura of loneliness in the air, the loneliness of men who escape into shadows.

She spied two young men wearing the white, skin-tight uniforms of the Moon Patrol. Devils of hatred danced in her eyes.

How she hated them! The souls of these empty-eyed rocketmen were as dry and hollow as the tubes of their rockets. These were the men who had robbed the moon of its mystery, its magic and beauty. These were the men who had transformed the moon into a flame-scarred target, a battered bulls-eye in the sky. If only she had the power to swoop down upon them in her *true* form: snake-haired, fire-eyed, fork-tongued!

She whirled away from them, the bottom of her thin robe floating upward like breeze-stirred feathers. "Over there, Martin. The young man at the end of the bar. I can feel his bitterness. Talk to him. He'll believe."

Martin walked up to the black-haired, side-burned man in the faded leather jacket. Hecate stood back, almost afraid to listen as words drifted to her faintly:

"... a woman," Martin was saying, "most beautiful you ever saw . . ."

A slow, deep, tired voice: "... weren't for a woman, I wouldn't be drunk."

Martin's gaunt face was white. Beads of perspiration glittered on his wrinkled forehead. ". . .

do anything you want . . . never find anyone like . . .”

The young man turned his head, disinterested.

Hecate trembled, then straightened and moved forward seductively. “Martin, tell him about my beauty, my body, tell him how warm my kisses are. Tell him how I make love.”

“Y—yes, beautiful Hecate. But—”

She silenced him with a sweep of her hand, sat on the bar stool beside the black-haired young man. She opened her robe to reveal the shadowy whiteness of her large breasts. She crossed her long legs and ran her delicate fingers suggestively down her firm, naked thighs. Her slightly parted lips touched the ear of the bitter-faced young man.

“Can it be,” she breathed, “that you don’t want to make love to me? It will be as nothing you’ve ever known.”

“Hecate, he can’t hear you,” whined Martin.

“Silence! Listen to me, young man, hear me. Listen to what my friend says. I can give you—”

The young man turned away. “Damned nut,” he muttered.

He downed his drink, cleared his throat, rose, strode to the swinging door.

So swiftly. So very swiftly.

Hecate knew that he was like all the others. He could not meas-

ure a philtre’s power on a slide rule nor discover Valhalla in a telescope.

Therefore he could not believe.

OUTSIDE again, they stood on the sidewalk. They were tight, silent little islands in the flowing stream of mankind.

At length Martin murmured, “Maybe you could stay alive in the city. After all, I believe in you, and I can love you—just as I used to.”

She sighed. “Thank you, Martin, but you know you couldn’t. You’re—forgive me—an old man.”

She stiffened. “Martin, the children! Of course. They could not love me, but at least they would believe. I could keep living. What time is it? Is it too late to find children?”

Martin shook his head. “It’s never too late to find children these days. They’re so filled with vita-tabs they sleep only an hour or so a night. But children aren’t as they used to be. They’ve changed, too.”

“Nonsense! Children never change. Take me to them. Quickly!”

Martin nodded. He began to walk.

The minds of children, thought Hecate. They were like empty bottles, uncapped, new and shining. Why not fill the bottles? Start with the boiling

potions of superstition. Add the blood-red wines of hatred, the midnight elixirs of fear. Stir well, shake, and cap tightly. Seal them forever against the cold winds of logic!

Down, down the furious streets. Pushing, dodging, stumbling, being pushed, squeezed, thrust, carried forward.

Somewhere in the night a clock struck, its clear tones rising above the babble of the city. It struck once, twice, three times.

Hecate paled. "Three o'clock, Martin. Hurry!"

The old man faltered. He leaned against the side of a building.

"Beautiful Hecate, I'm so tired." He closed his eyes and gasped for breath. "I told you I'd been sick. Let me rest just a minute—"

"No," she snapped. "If dawn comes and we haven't found another believer—" She shuddered, unable to voice the horrible thought.

Martin's eyes opened. "Yes, beautiful Hecate."

Onward. Like scraps of drift-wool in a riptide.

AT last a great emptiness lay before them, a blue-floored canyon resting in the midst of towering steel and concrete.

"Here we are," said Martin, panting. "It's the spaceport."

A NIGHT WITH HECATE

They walked up to a transparent glassite wall that was stripped with red warning lights. Inside, to their right, was a long line of white-domed hangars. Far across the field, as if on the other side of a lake, lay a score of needle-nosed continental rockets. They were huddled in a neat, unbroken row like dead wasps on a collector's display board. Nearer, in the center of the field, three guide-cars were towing a silver rocket of Mars Exploration.

Abruptly, Hecate saw the children.

There were two, boys, one very small, one not so small. Their noses and palms were pressed against the transparent wall. Their eager gazes were hungry tongues devouring the blue miracle before them.

"Be careful, Martin. Don't frighten them."

Martin tottered toward them, touching the wall once and again to keep his balance. Hecate glided after him, her features calm and confident.

"Hi, boys," said Martin.

The boys turned. Their bodies seemed manlike and strangely similar in their white tunics. It was as if they were store manikins, products of molds that differed only in size.

The larger boy, about ten, said, "What's the matter, Mister? You sick?"

Martin tried unsuccessfully to laugh. "N—no. I just want to tell you something. Would you believe I've found something a lot more fun than watching rockets?"

The smaller boy, about six, seemed interested. "What's more fun than watchin' rockets?"

"It sounds strange, but it's true. Have you heard of invisibility?"

"Sure, like with the Green Flash on TV. But there ain't no such thing, really."

Martin smiled. He was breathing easier now. "No, not so far as science knows. But I'm a scientist, and—" He hesitated, a mock frown creasing his forehead. "No, I guess I'd better not tell you."

Hecate scowled. What in Lucifer was old Martin babbling about? She started to scream a protest.

The older boy stepped back from the wall. "Okay, go on and tell us, Mister."

Suddenly she understood. She clapped her hands. Martin was being clever. The scientific approach. Yes, this was it. Yes, yes! She bent forward, her head shaking with excitement, a black and effervescent cloud hovering over the children.

"It's like this," said Martin. "I was working in my lab—"

"What lab do you work in?" asked the boy.

"My own. My private lab."

The boy snorted. "Nobody works alone. Only the government labs can get equipment. You run along, Mister."

"No," said the smaller boy. "Let's listen to him."

Martin sighed. "Well, like I began to say, I discovered a strange gas, and it—"

"You a para-physiologist?"

"Er, no."

"A psycho-syntheticist?"

"I, er, no, I'm more like a chemist."

The boy crinkled his nose contemptuously.

"Anyway," continued Martin, "this gas makes a person invisible!"

The boys laughed.

"You don't believe me? All right, look over here. Look hard. What do you see?"

"Nothin'"

Hecate stiffened as Martin pointed to her. With all the force of her will she struggled to make herself visible.

Martin coaxed, "You can see someone right here if you try. Just keep looking. Keep trying. You can see her. You *will* see her."

"I don't see nothin'," said the older boy.

Hecate cried, "Look *at* me, not *through* me! I'm here in front of you. See me!"

The smaller boy squinted. His body hunched forward. "Jupiter,

for a second I thought I did see somethin'. Somethin' black."

"That's it!" exclaimed Martin. "You're seeing her! Keep looking!"

"Aw, you're imagining things," said the older boy. "Let's go home."

"But I wanna see the Mars rocket take off."

"The Mars rocket ain't gonna take off till morning."

The boys turned away.

A sob broke from Hecate's lips. "Wait, children! You almost saw me! Look again, oh please, just once!"

She lunged after them. Her quivering hands touched their eyes, lips, noses, shoulders. Her fingers were like flashing knitting needles weaving invisible coats about the children.

"Look at me, please—"

They passed through her, feeling nothing, seeing nothing.

Bitter realization came to her.

The bottles were already filled, capped, and sealed forever.

THEY walked silently and without purpose. What time was it? Four o'clock? Five? How soon would dawn arrive? She thought of that terrible, final moment when the *real* darkness might arrive. She trembled and forced the vision from her mind.

They came to a small park. The trees and shrubs and grass

were cloaked in a darkness broken feebly by lights from the city. Darkness, thought Hecate, was the nearest thing to being home.

They sat wearily upon a rickety bench.

Hecate murmured, "Why is the park empty. Why are we alone?"

"Nobody comes to parks anymore, except maybe lovers now and then. It's too quiet here, and people aren't used to quietness. They're doing away with parks. This is one of the few left."

She smiled grimly. An idea formed in her brain.

"Men can not help us," she mused, "but there is One who might help even now."

Martin was silent.

Hecate rose. "Yes, the greatest of them all, the only one except me who has not perished. The King. The Master of Darkness."

Martin shivered. "Even *he* isn't believed in much any more. I don't think—"

"You don't think *he* could come? I know how to make him come!"

She clasped her hands together, raising her head to the night sky. She felt a hope and a strength returning to her.

"Yes, it would be easy." She glanced down at the bench. "This could be our altar."

Martin sprang up, blinking away his weariness. "I've worshipped you, mighty Hecate, as

my father and grandfather worshipped you. I've thrilled at your beauty, exalted in your love. B—but I don't like sacrifices."

"Now Martin, you will bring me—"

"No, please—"

"A virgin."

He lowered his gaze. "You mustn't ask that. It isn't right."

She snarled, cat-like. "You're an old man, Martin. You've still a chance for immortality, a chance to be young again. Wouldn't you like to love me as you used to?"

His gaze flicked from side to side, nervously, as if he were seeking a place to hide. "Someone would see us."

"Nonsense. You said yourself that no one comes to parks anymore. A sacrifice would please *him* most. Go, Martin! Bring back a virgin—a girl, soft, young, vibrant, innocent!"

Her voice was charged with an electric savagery that made the old man cringe. There had been a time when the impact of that command would have stilled a screaming wind, silenced a storm-whipped sea. Once, Dagon himself would have cowered beneath its razor-edged fury.

Martin bowed. "Yes, beautiful Hecate. I will bring you a virgin."

SHE waited. The seconds were like heartbeats pumping hatred and desperation through her

veins, pumping ever faster.

Soon, footsteps.

Martin was returning, his white face shining in the shadows. Under his arm was a small bundle.

"B—beautiful Hecate, I could not find a virgin, and so—"

"And so you brought a child!" The beat of hatred in her quickened. "Good! Good!"

Martin's mouth quivered. "It is not a child."

She frowned. As he came nearer, she stared at the bundle cradled in his arm.

"Martin!"

A hairy ball of life squirmed uncomfortably in his grasp. It was a tiny white terrier puppy.

She shook with rage and despair. "You idiot!" She spun away from him, her foot stomping the earth.

A stupid, soulless puppy. What an insult to *him*. An insignificant puppy for One who once dreamed of mastering the universe!

She glanced up at the night sky. That light in the East—was it the light of dawn? Had the tortuous moments passed so swiftly?

Fresh terror gripped her. There was little time. Perhaps, she reasoned, even a puppy might have some sort of a soul. Even a puppy's flesh was filled with hot, rich blood. *He* might be pleased after all.

She whirled back to Martin, eyes like hot coals. "Start the Sabbath. You have cord?"

"Yes, beautiful Hecate."

"Tie the animal to a leg of the bench. A knife?"

"My pocket knife."

"That will do. Hurry!"

THE old man worked slowly and clumsily. His hands were like knotted tree stumps, his breath like the wheezing of a fish flopping on sun-baked sand.

"Now the fire, Martin. A great fire!"

Martin fumbled, gasped, tottered.

Twig upon twig, branch upon branch, limb upon limb.

"More, Martin! A fire that will reach to the moon!"

More branches were ripped from dry sockets. Martin staggered back and forth, thrusting load after load upon the dark pyramid before the bench.

"Excellent, Martin! Light it!"

The scratch of a match, the pinpoint of flame. The ignition, the hissing, the crackling, the explosion of scarlet.

Accompanied by white, billowing smoke, the flames ripped into the night air.

They began the chant. Softly at first, then swelling into a piercing crescendo.

"Dance, Martin! Do his dance!"

Martin stood puffing, opening

and closing his eyes with each rasping breath.

"Dance! I command you!"

Martin danced. His lean body was like that of a grotesque marionette manipulated by an insane master. The knife in his upraised hand shone crimson in the light of the crackling fire.

The puppy stood shivering, tail between its trembling legs. Its tiny body struggled helplessly against the twine that bound it to the leg of the bench.

"Faster, faster!"

Louder and louder grew the chant. Wilder and wilder became the dance. Higher and higher surged the flames.

"Now, the sacrifice!"

Martin froze in his dance. An idiotic, pain-wracked grin spread over his features. The knife slipped from his hand. He clutched his chest as if it were a bleeding wound.

"Martin! The sacrifice!"

Martin fell.

A coldness seemed to sweep over the park, chilling the air's hot hatred, sucking brightness from the flames.

"Martin? What's wrong?" Hecate's voice was no longer shrill. It was a feeble whisper, no louder than the whining of the frightened puppy.

Martin lay on the dark earth. His wide eyes stared for a moment at Hecate. His lips moved, but no sound came forth. The

words that lay in his throat were never said.

All things were fading—the flames and their crackling, the light and noise from the city, even hatred itself. The world was dissolving like delicate sand sculpture being washed away by a sea tide.

Wide-eyed and open-mouthed,

Hecate stared down at her feet, legs, thighs, body. They, too, were dissolving.

She realized that it was not unpleasant. It was like sinking into dark cotton to sleep forever. After all, she remembered, the nearest thing to home was darkness. . . .

THE END

**A slow, deep, tired voice: ". . . weren't for
a woman, I wouldn't be drunk."**

See A NIGHT WITH HECATE

