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COVER PAINTING BY EMSH

(*illustrating "Baby"*)

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*Mary-Carter Roberts' When Jack Smith Fought Old Satan (F&SF, July, 1957) was, I feel, one of the most distinguished fantasies that we have reprinted. I'm delighted now to introduce the first appearance of a Roberts original—completely different from her Delaware legend in setting, concept, style and tone, and sharing with it only the ability to impart solid conviction to a supernatural narrative. There's a quiet sense of unquestionable reality about this story of the reactions of an ordinary family to a small vast impossibility.*

## One Sent

by MARY-CARTER ROBERTS

THE HERNDONS, WHO WERE A FAMILY of five living in a two-story brick house on a good, if not the best street in a small city, had a cat they called Plushbottom. He had come to them full-grown, and very willingly, though without any great affection, they had kept him; they cheerfully liked him, but they would not have missed him much if he had gone away. He was nice-looking, being white and orange and always clean. After they had had him several months, Mr. Herndon discovered that he was an angel.

This happened on a summer Sunday morning. Mr. Herndon was standing in his back yard, after having eaten his usual late (nine thirty) Sunday breakfast, and he saw Plushbottom spread a pair of neat and pretty feather wings, rise

from the spot where he had been sitting, over by the ash can against the foundation wall, and fly some twenty-five feet to Mrs. Herndon's lilac bush, where he came down expertly on the grass. He was then facing Mr. Herndon and outlined in foreshortened relief against the lilac foliage. Mr. Herndon saw he had a halo too. It was not any thin, penciled-looking ring, floating loose in the air above him. It was a sprouting fan of radiance that went across his head just behind his ears and down the sides of his face to about the ends of his jaws. Plushbottom, back on the ground, settled into a comfortable half-crouch but kept his wings a little raised, as if for the sake of coolness. He did nothing more. He just sat. Mr. Herndon, who owned a garage and machine shop and was called

Ed by his business associates, assumed that he had lost his mind.

He clenched his teeth. He had a queer taste in his mouth. He was holding one hand in his trouser pocket and he took a fold of the flesh of his thigh between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed with all his might. This was not "pinching himself." It was a reflex action; he was not aware of making it. He next felt as if he were disintegrating and would crumple to the ground. He did not, but he rocked on his feet. It was his wife who saved him.

She had come out with him, meaning to show him her newest plan for developing the back yard—this time a modified application of a diagram published in *House and Garden*, calling for a flagstone walk. She had been waiting for him to finish his cigar, when, she knew, he would be most likely to make promises. Pending the moment, she had wandered off and disappeared—that is, she had gone some thirty steps and so was behind the garage. Returning just after Plushbottom alighted, she was caught full in the eyes by the spectacle of his incredible equipment. She uttered a bubbling moan, ran tottering to her husband and threw herself on his chest. "Papa, Papa," she gibbered, simply rooting and burrowing with her whole face, "look at the cat! He's got wings!" Mr. Herndon understood then that he had not gone crazy. He

did not have himself, suddenly a lunatic, on his hands to deal with. He had a supernatural visitor.

He put his arms around his wife and they stood there, clinging hard together. They were a loving couple, but they had not shared an embrace like that—one frenziedly and necessarily given to excluding terror and affirming their mutuality in defense—since the days of the great depression. They had been bride and groom then, and they had learned within an hour that his job was at an end and the bank where they had deposited their savings, including all their wedding present checks, had failed. Even so early in their marriage, they were "planning to buy"—that was how they had said it, meaning planning to buy a home but holding the intention too manifest to require explicit statement—and they had seen that they could not buy after all, and probably could not even go on paying rent, and their concept of themselves had stood in their minds' eyes, threatened. Then, in this same way, they had clung together. They did not remember the early time now, of course. They remained embraced for a long moment, and Mr. Herndon, while rendering his share of the clasp, kept his gaze fearfully directed over his wife's head at the creature that, up to two minutes before, he had called Plushbottom. It did not return the look.

It was staring down at the grass a few inches ahead of its nose. Presently it came out of its crouch a little and made a quick dab with a forepaw at the spot it had been watching. A June bug bounced into the air. Plushbottom, or the thing that had been Plushbottom, sat back on his hindquarters and swung. He hit, but not hard enough. The June bug recovered and zoomed away. In horror, Mr. Herndon waited to see if Plushbottom would zoom after it. He did not. He settled down again, this time clear down, letting his belly rest on the earth, only the tips of his forepaws showing beside his bosomy chest, his wings sinking until their feathers touched the grass. The Herndons went on excluding and affirming, and silence hung over the backyard. Another long moment passed. The halo blazed away beneath the bush.

It was that—the halo—that brought Mr. Herndon back to articulateness, if not to poise. "Mama," he said at last, hoarsely, solemnly, "look." And, though she did not want him to, and resisted, seizing fistfuls of his shirt and whimpering, now tearfully, he turned her around to face the thing that, after all, was there. "Look," he said again. "See that light around his head? He's not just got wings. He's got that other too. That means—well—he's an angel." His wife made a hysterical sound, and, feeling himself that the word was as

awful as the thing, he amended. "It means he's good," he said. The tension that had held him since his first sight of the mystery departed, and his teeth chattered a little, but he relaxed. "He's good," he repeated. "G-G-God must have sent him. You—well—you know."

They had said it then, had put a name on it and could contemplate it, if no more. Plushbottom was an angel. There remained the matter of coping with him in that identity. There remained, in short, virtually everything.

Before they could assume the responsibility, they tried an alternative, the only one that occurred to them. They could not doubt that the creature under the lilac was, indeed, an angel—not with all those angelic accoutrements to prove it—but maybe he was not also their cat. Not their cheerfully accepted Plushie at all, but some Being Who, for reasons of His own, had adopted Plushie's appearance and then, as Mr. Herndon thought of it, "just flown in." (He could not as yet bring himself to tell Mama that he had actually seen the Being in flight.) The idea, when he proposed it, gave her courage; she dared to take a few steps in the Being's direction. She bent forward then until she was a right angle, she stared hard. She wept afresh. "No, Papa," she whispered, "it's him. See that place on his ear? That little speck?" Mr. Herndon bravely came, looked and nodded.

He saw the speck. "It's where he had a tick," his wife continued. "I took it off and put mercurochrome on the bite. That's mercurochrome there now. Our mercurochrome. He couldn't get that up in Heaven. The bottle's on the bathroom shelf."

There was silence while Mr. Herndon took in the implications of her opinion: that Heavenly Beings might adopt mortal forms but not mortal achievements, that anything supernatural—as an angel—had to remain in a supernatural condition, and might not assume even the stain left by a human mere improvement on nature . . . was that what she had meant? Or simply what she had said—that the bottle would not have been available? Masculinity inclined Mr. Herndon to argue, but then he had a rapidly passing vision of a Heavenly storeroom stocked with Heavenly disinfectant, which would require Heavenly gauze, which would indicate a Heavenly clinic, Heavenly surgery, Heavenly accidents, Heavenly disease—Heavenly ticks?—and, feeling too much of the outside coming in, he shut his mind. "OK, Mama," he said. "It's Plushie."

They had to tell the family. That would be next. It would be soon too. Already they heard Ed Junior clattering about upstairs. He would be coming down, he would want breakfast. Mama glanced at the door. What were they to do? Go

in and leave an angel, one sent by God? It would probably be sacrilegious. Pick the angel up, tuck him under the arm and carry him where he had shown no wish to be? Worse. Call him? Call him "kitty"? Invite him, obviously. Ask him humbly and sincerely if he would care to enter their unworthy house. They stared at one another. Then they heard Ed Junior shouting from within: "Hey Mom!" "You—you—" said Mrs. Herndon desperately, and fled. "Gee," whispered Mr. Herndon, left alone and in a near-extinction of embarrassment.

They told the family finally by bringing them all out and showing them. There were their two children—Junior, aged sixteen, and Baby, the daughter, aged fourteen—and Mrs. Herndon's mother, aged seventy and called Gran. By the time the five of them were assembled, Mr. Herndon was feeling a fearful anxiety about the still wider spread of the news—for instance, to their neighbors who, after all, were separated from them only by a privet hedge. What were *they* going to think? He was saved, though, from dealing with that question at the moment when he had so much else to deal with, saved by Plushbottom himself. He remained under the bush until he had been inspected by everyone, and then spread his wings and flew up to the dining room window and perched on the ledge.

There he sat, looking perfectly cat-like, in spite of . . . everything. Mr. Herndon bounded up the backsteps, ran through the kitchen and plunged into the dining room. He tore the screen out in seconds. Plushbottom entered, jumping, not flying, and walked to the table on which the breakfast dishes remained. He looked up and miaoued. "My God," groaned Mr. Herndon, and then hit himself in the mouth with his fist. "Excuse me. I mean, forgive—uh—" He stopped, feeling his ears burn red.

The others came trooping in and by that time Plushbottom (still afoot) had gone on to the living room. Through what they called the door (though it was not a door at all, but a passage between two bookcases extending out toward one another from opposite walls and used for bric-a-brac), they saw him bound into his favorite chair. Junior and Baby started toward him. Mr. Herndon stopped them. In a lowered voice he said, "I guess he knows we want to talk this over. Need time to—make arrangements. He's giving us our chance. He don't figure to butt in." He broke off, again overcome by the faults of common speech applied to Heavenly visitors. An angel butting in? If Plushbottom had heard him, what would he be thinking?

Junior said, "Gee, Pop, if I hadn't seen him take off, I'd a thought some joker had fixed a harness on him. You could fake those wings

that way. But then he wouldn't be able to work them."

"It's the—the—around his head," whispered Baby, waving her hands around her own head, obviously referring to the halo. "That shine. What do you call it, Mom? No joker could fake that."

"They could if they wired him," retorted Junior, though without any real conviction.

"Where would they hide the battery?" demanded Baby, not yielding, so early in the morning, to feminine pity for male illogic, but brash and full of vigor of her own. "There's no place on a cat you could hide a battery, and you know it."

"Underneath," said Junior, now merely dogged.

"He'd tear it off," asserted Baby, and had a triumphant afterthought. "He'd tear a harness off too. You can't tie things on a cat. They won't stand for it. Pooey."

"Listen," said Mr. Herndon, and sat down in his customary place at the head of the table. They all followed suit. And, being seated, they all looked at him. He told them at once to quit their silly gabble about jokes and jokers and pay a little mind. He paused then and began again, observing that they might as well quit talking about cats too. "He's not a cat," he declared grimly. "That's the whole thing of it. Plushbottom's an angel. We may as well face it, now as well as later on."

Not able to think of another word, he stared at their faces, and, staring, saw a straw to grasp, or grasp at, to save him from what could not be expressed. The kids looked like kids, Mama was—well—Mama, but Gran was set apart by something the others did not have: Gran was old. Her hair was white, she was wrinkled, she was bent. He had known her for many years and he had never thought of her as wise, but still there was that saying—old people sometimes know best. He appealed to her in beseeching hope. "What do *you* think?" he inquired.

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I'd never of believed it in this world," Gran answered promptly, and went on for some time to describe her vast amazement. Listening and waiting, he remembered how he and Mama had acted, and took patience and did not let his hope depart. The old lady concluded her oration by handsomely agreeing with him. "I guess you're right about it, Eddie," she announced. "That Plushbottom's an angel, sure enough, though he never did look like anything but a tomcat to me."

"Well, what shall we do?" he asked, feeling the question so clamorous as to be unnecessary, and consequently repeating it. "What do people do that have angels, anyway?"

"It's in the Scriptures," she replied. "I know you young folks

don't think much of Bible reading, but up there in my room I read mine, so I know what it says. An angel visited Abraham and he gave him something to eat. A good hot meal, I mean. Not something left over, handed out the back door. He was blessed for it, too."

"What was the blessing?" demanded Baby.

"Abraham?" said Gran in surprise. "Why, he founded the Jewish race."

"Oh," said Baby.

There was a brief silence. Mama broke it suddenly. She wrung her hands, leaned forward to stare, not at her parent but her husband, and cried out with forlorn insistence, "I've been *thinking* about his food! I have, all along, Papa. I *want* to feed him. I really do. But what do you give an—an angel that's a *cat*? Table scraps?" She fell back in her chair despairingly.

"Get him the best," said Mr. Herndon.

"What best?" Mama revived to wail again. "How do I know what angels like to eat? And where can I give it to him? In a saucer on the kitchen floor? That's where I always *have* fed Plushbottom. But now he ought to have the best place. He ought to have the table—the *whole* table. Only—cats don't eat off of tables. Oh, now that he's an angel, I just *don't* see how I can handle his meals!" She wept.

"Gee," said Junior.

"Gran," asked Baby intently,

"what does it say in the Bible angels *do*? What do they come *for*?"

"They bring glad tidings," answered Gran. "They work miracles. They help you out of trouble."

"Would that mean you had to be in trouble *before* you got one?" Junior asked thoughtfully.

"Paul and Silas, they were in prison," replied Gran, looking very bright and happy. She sat up straight and waited alertly for more questioning. But silence settled around the table.

Mr. Herndon was groping within himself. When he had asked Gran what they ought to do, he had had neither meals nor miracles in mind, but acceptance. Adjustment to a tremendous fact. An angel had come down to them and they should come up to the angel. But, surely, it would be *possible*? There must be some reason—some reason why they, the Herndons, not the Taylors next door, who had a dog, or the Browns at the corner, who kept canaries, got the distinction. The honor, the wonderful, wonderful honor. Could they live up to it? They hadn't as yet; so much was clear to him and he unhesitatingly took the blame. He had gone at it wrong from the very beginning. "I ought to kneeled down when I first saw him," he told himself sadly. "I ought to kneeled right down on the ground, irregardless." He sighed so profoundly that he broke the charmed stillness that had been enwrapping

them. His wife, who had been watching his face while he thought and now was getting frightened—not terrified by the supernatural, but lovingly frightened—said in a voice of sudden calm, "Why don't we just leave things go the way they are for a while, Papa? Until we find out what he wants. I expect he'll know how to tell us. After all, he's from up in Heaven." He gave her a grateful look. The conference ended on it.

All the rest of the morning and on into the afternoon, they left things the way they were, waiting for Plushbottom to make his revelation, which meant that they let him have the living room to himself and inclined to go on tiptoe, at least when walking on the first floor. He spent the time sleeping. This was normal; he always slept in the daytime, though not always with such a lack of interruption; his program of slumber on ordinary Sundays would be broken by dumpings to the floor when somebody wanted the chair he had chosen and by hoistings to laps when somebody erratically decided to pet him. So today, though the Herndons changed their rule of behavior, he was merely keeping to custom. He slept, and he slept exactly like a cat, curled into a half-circle, his paws and tail swept all together. He had lifted his wings from his sides on lying down. They stayed so, curved back above him, drooping, relaxed. Only the halo

did not partake of a soporific quality. It burned around his head as brightly steady as when he had been awake. He was a sight, there on the pride of the Herndon living room, the new lounge chair with the glazed chintz slip covers that Mama had made herself and that none of their friends as yet had been able to tell from those bought at expensive decorator shops.

They were all aware of his slumber, for, though Papa had told them not to spy, they spied. Nobody could keep from taking peeps. Gran was the least guilty. She looked twice at half-hour intervals, and then went upstairs to read her Bible and get primed for more questioning. Mama, who was working in the kitchen, kept making trips to the dining room to fetch and carry. Simply by turning her head on these passages, she could see the lounge chair and its occupant, and so she took no step out of the true paths of her errands, but the errands themselves were not true. As for the children, they seemed to be staying in Junior's room on the second floor; at least, Mr. Herndon, in his den across the hall from the impromptu sanctum, heard their voices up there, but he knew, without admitting the knowledge, that the sounds were misleading. His offspring, who most of the time descended the stairs with the clatter of avalanches, could, as he was aware, glide with the silence of shadows

when they had occasion, and he felt no doubt that they were making occasions today. But he did not go out into the hall to see. He scarcely moved all the long period until the afternoon dinner. He lay back in his armchair and tried to think. That was all.

He must do something, do something, do something. And he could not think of anything that was right. Such was the progress he made. When Mama finally called them to the dining room, he was looking somberly at the conclusion: his headship of the family, very real and also (because he was no tyrant but a man conscious of responsibility) very precious—the reward allowed him for the loss of his freedom, earned and paid in love—had been taken from him. This was the greatest crisis his family had ever had or ever would have, and he had failed to meet it. He had not had a single constructive idea, not one practical plan. The angel had destroyed his identity.

He sat down at the table and became aware first of a silence and then of an imminent communication. He looked at the faces along the board and saw that all of them were alight—eager, even happy. Even very happy. He frowned and looked again. Mama broke the news to him. She was dutifully tentative, but he could see that, whatever their notion was, she took it for granted he would agree.

She said, "The children have got an idea, Papa. They were telling me about it and I said they'd just have to hear what you had to say. About—" She stopped. Mr. Herndon saw that she was blushing. Plushbottom was obviously embarrassing to her too, by now. She had come so far.

He thought, "So, the children." They had an idea. The kids. Well, yes, and why not? He had failed, as chief of the clan. Gran had failed, as elder counselor. There was that other saying too—out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. Out of their mouths . . . what? Mr. Herndon could not remember ever having heard the proverb completed, but he was sure of its general sense. Children saw straight. Children saw what was really there. He would—oh, by all means—let the children speak.

He turned to Junior. For the first time, he perceived in his son another man, and one young in manhood. He felt the appropriate jealousy. It was more sharp in that it stabbed him at a moment already dedicated in his thinking to his own failure. But—personal emotions, indeed. An angel was in the living room. "Go ahead, son," said Mr. Herndon. "Speak up."

Junior, in delight at the encouragement, looked consciously modest. "Well," he began, "I just thought of a couple of things, Pop. That's all. They're both obvious. One is, this has got to be *handled*

right. And that won't be easy, because it's not like anything else anybody ever heard of. Correct?" He put the curt query in a deferential tone and waited for his father's confirmation. Mr. Herndon nodded. Out of the mouths . . . ? Maybe—maybe.

"So I told Baby," Junior resumed, "and we both put it up to Mom—there's these two things. We'll call in a bunch of preachers. That's first. And I mean a big bunch. The top men from all the churches. Get them to draw up a statement that it's not a fake. That'll take it, right from the beginning, out of the class of spiritualists and table-knockers and like them."

He paused and Mrs. Herndon said softly, "Don't let your dinner get cold, dear. Eat while you talk." Junior made a spasmodic stab at his potato, put a morsel into his mouth and swallowed rapidly. He smiled at his mother but returned his attention to his father.

"After that," he declared, "we must *absolutely* refuse all advertising contracts, and we mustn't sign up for any personal appearance tours. That stuff's not in this class. The thing about this is—it's unique."

He paused again, but obviously only for emphasis. He was into the stream of his concept now; he rushed on. "We must keep our aim at the highest," he said with shining eyes, "and never lower it for any inducement, no matter how

good the offers are. Because, when we get through the first—well—*rush*, with the legitimate channels, I mean—the newsreels, TV, picture magazines (but only the big ones), the book *Baby and I* will write, and the movie that we'll let only the most topflight artistic producer make—well, *then* we'll set up a sort of church of our own and work miracles. Like in *The Song of Bernadette*, but even better because *our* angel has got wings, he can fly and you can see him. Nothing like it in the whole world! That's first," said Junior, subsiding and dramatizing the subsidence by drawing a long, quiet breath. "I mean the way we'll lead up to it is our first chief consideration. But there's another item too, Pop. A little one, but even more paramount. We'll absolutely have to change his name." Baby gave a brief giggle. "We'll have to do that right here and now," Junior continued, ignoring her. "We can't go ahead with our project, using the name of Plushbottom. I mean, we *can't*. It's already been copyrighted."

It took them quite a while to understand that Mr. Herndon meant his rejection of these plans, and then, as they said with reproach, they simply could not see why.

He carried out his own plan that evening, for by evening he had one. He went alone into the living room and knelt before the sleeping angel. He said, "I'm sorry."

He tried to say then, "Forgive me," but the curious phrase was too much for him. He repeated, "I'm sorry," and added, "I sure am, Plushie, old boy, I sure am." Then he picked up the unmoving figure, taking it around the body, using care not to touch the Heavenly wings, using great and dreadful care not to pass his hands through the Heavenly light. He carried Plushbottom out of the house to the garage and set him on the front seat of the car. All the time, Plushbottom felt and behaved exactly like a cat.

He was warm and fluid when lifted, he tightened a little while being carried, and, on being set down after so long a sleep, he stretched, arching his back, opening his mouth very wide, obviously not to yawn but to extend the stretch to the muscles of his jaws, stretching his wings too, Mr. Herndon saw, feather after feather. Then he sat down, at first erect but, apparently for the sake of better balance, changing to a crouch when Mr. Herndon put the car in motion.

Mr. Herndon drove to the best place he knew. It was the summit of a fairly high hill, some miles beyond the town. There was a view there—the long river coming down its winding valley and broad tracts of woods on the slopes with faraway, gentle-looking farms dotted thinly among them. A view Mr. Herndon was fond of. The

road did not go to the hilltop; it only wound over the shoulder; so he climbed the last hundred yards afoot. He carried the angel in his hands, holding them out before him. The halo, he saw, shone in the dark, but faintly.

The ground on the crest was cleared of trees and grown over with high grass. Mr. Herndon trampled over a space about two feet square until he had made the verdure on it lie flat. He set Plushbottom down there. He stood before him and bared his head. He said again, "I'm sorry," but this time he added the only term of respect that was in the least familiar to him. He said, "sir." His tone was gravely formal. And, if Plushbottom had replied, had spoken in a human voice, or any understandable voice, or had flown up to Mr. Herndon's level and looked him in

the eye, or had done anything—anything at all, except just be—Mr. Herndon, as he bitterly realized, could or might have made the response, felt the ecstasy and given rein to it, done his unimaginable part. Prostrated himself. Struck his forehead on the ground. Danced. Sung. Lacerated his flesh. Praised God. Whatever it was. He might have. But Plushbottom remained himself, a small vast impossibility, pure-eyes and inquiring. Mr. Herndon said, "Goodby," and turned and strode down the hill.

He told himself, when he reached the car, that his was the only family he had ever heard of that had an angel visitor and put the visitor out of doors. But then, his was the only family he had ever heard of that had an angel visitor. Period, thought Mr. Herndon, period.

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