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by Steve Stanton



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In Defense of Angels

Steve Stanton



In the holy hush of heaven the prisoner was led forward into the courtroom at the end of the universe, his eyes downcast and lips grim. His hands were ceremonially bound before him with loose cotton twine, his legs unencumbered. The charges against him were self-evident, the details painstakingly chronicled. By the written rule of law, he had this one chance to speak on his own behalf before the holy tribunal.

The prisoner approached a small dais and stepped upon it. He raised his eyes and smiled with confident grace. He began his testimony in a sure voice rich and lustrous:



My name is Herbert, and I'm an angel.

Just an ordinary angel, mind you. Nothing spectacular. No wings, no harp, no white pajamas—I'm not even eligible for the music lessons given by the Seven Trumpeters. Not that I have no appreciation for music—it's just not my job. You understand. An angel has got to know his place in the scheme of things—just look at the Light-bearer now.

As for me, I work in the Bureau of Records, Words Division, and at the time in question I was busy recording the words of one Harvey J. Rumbottom, a welder first-class in a small town in Central Ontario. Canada, that is—backwoods America. I wasn't recording his actions, nor concerned with his intentions; those are separate departments entirely. Just words. Verbal speech. That's my specialty.

It may not sound like much, and I'll freely admit that Words-Division angels are not highly regarded among the varied host of heaven, not with Gabriel and Michael stealing all the thunder these days, but we in the business regard it as a most serious occupation despite the lack of glamor, and it's difficult not to get emotionally involved in the work. Consider for a moment the King's own commandment, that by their words they will be justified and by their words condemned. Might that not be a legitimate cause for concern among the humble ranks of Words Division? Ah, I see that you agree.

At the time, this thought weighed heavily on my mind; and because my assigned human, Harvey J. Rumbottom, was assuredly in the latter category (perhaps one of the foulest speakers I had ever come across in my long and not-so illustrious career), I became greatly sick at heart and most

miserable in my prescribed duties. And that's why I did what I did, and why I now stand before you to give an account of my actions.

He had a troubled life right from the start. His father left him when he was a mere lad, forcing him early in life to become the man of the house, to grasp at maturity from below, to hide his insecurities behind a veil of cynicism and false pride. It was then that I noted the first pangs of profanity, as I dutifully recorded each braggart line in his book. I was not disheartened, though, for the boy's mother was a churchgoer, and though not well-off financially she provided adequately as she was able. Little Harvey took some ribbing from school chums because his clothes were not always up to the current fashion trends (being hand-me-downs from an elder cousin), but I felt that the boy would yet rise above such minor traumas to one day make his stand beside his mother.

But grades at school were lacking, as was discipline at home, and young men were running wild in those days (as they seem to do from time to time), leading poor Harvey down the wrong roads at unseemly speed—carousing under the moon in a toxic condition, learning from cheap women of the night how to pervert God's precious gifts. You can imagine my heartbreak as I watched day after day. He was like a crop spoiling untended, a diseased animal running wild, a foul wind blowing aimlessly on the earth. Do I belabor the point? Forgive me if I do.

When his mother died I felt that all hope was lost, for she had been his only healthy influence. Predictably, Harvey J. quickly slid from bad to worse as juvenile delinquency blossomed into outright crime, and I, obedient to my holy calling, recorded each lawless word amid much sorrow and tears. The judicial system stood as the last barrier before him, and I tried to persuade

myself that once he had been caught and criminally prosecuted he might come to his senses.

I waited patiently until the day came, but once again my prayers were dashed. His brief time in jail hardened him even more, his conscience as though seared with a branding iron, the mark of the beast. Blasphemy poured from his lips unchecked. Nothing was sacred to him save the almighty dollar. He was doomed to the pit, I could see plainly. Still I wrote each word down in much anguish of heart, knowing that the very record would condemn him and yet unable to swerve from my duty.

I began to search back through his old files during my off-duty hours, looking for the faintest glimmer of spirituality, any stray sentence I might cling to for hope. Nothing emerged, though long nights were spent in the library. He had never uttered the least whisper to God—not even a hint of a prayer.

Thus I made my discovery, insignificant as it seemed at first glance: not only had Harvey J. Rumbottom never accepted the salvation of God, he had never refused it either. In plain truth I could not remember a single instance in which Harvey J. Rumbottom had even been *offered* the salvation of God. I found this most peculiar, especially because his mother had been at least a nominal church attender (I am not sure of her eternal status; it's not my department). But I normally have a good memory for this type of thing, so I decided to check the Official Records to make sure. That was where my trouble began.

Thoughts Division was a closed book to me; the angels there have a fanatical concern for individual privacy—tight-lipped and tongue-tied. Not a whisper was forthcoming from them until the Day, I was emphatically assured. So I turned to Deeds Division, or the "action angels" as they're

known in the Bureau. A man's works should be public information, you might think. By their fruits you shall know them? Good deeds precede and sins follow? Hah!

I went straight to the Division head, hoping to start right at the top and get quick action. I had to wait a year to see him. That's right—a full Earth year. Can you imagine? And all the while Harvey J. cursing up storm clouds of smoke and brimstone. And then when I finally arrived at my appointment and told the good angel what I needed, he stared at me as though I was mentally incompetent. He asked me where I worked and laughed in my face when I told him—said I was carping up the wrong transgalactic wormhole. (I later received written admonishment from my own supervisor at Words Division regarding my effrontery, which, of course, I ignored.)

Not to be easily dissuaded, I struck up a conversation with a librarian at Deeds Central, a fair-haired angel whom I may have misled to a tiny degree, and managed to wheedle out the name of a lesser department head who worked in the same time zone I was concerned with. From that point on, I was surreptitious. I admit it freely and beg your pardon. I tracked down area representatives through devious conversation, sometimes on the pretense of being an inspector from the Bureau Guard—the most feared organization among all record-keeping angels. Another year passed while the machinations bogged down, my assigned human by now working with a vocabulary fit to summon the Light-bearer himself.

And finally I found him, the action angel responsible for my Harvey J. Rumbottom. It was such a momentous occasion for me that I very nearly hugged the poor fellow, Zakarel, as he came out of his office. We were like brothers, he and I—united for all eternity by the wasted life of Harvey J.

Rumbottom, the two of us recording, by both word and deed respectively, the poor sinner's sordid trail toward the lake of fire where the worm never dies and the flame is not quenched.

I followed him home. I spied on him as he went about his angelic activities. I noted his scholarly interests, his likes and dislikes, his exercise schedule. And then at last, when I felt the moment was perfect, I bumped into him, literally, and fell back solidly to the ground. Already he was in my debt, you see, even as he helped me to my feet and began to apologize. I introduced myself, and happened to mention in casual conversation the name Harvey J. Rumbottom.

"Coincidence upon coincidence," said he.

"Fortunate occurrence," said I.

"Who would have thought that such a thing could be possible among the countless legion of watchers?" he asked. "The King surely must have a sense of humor, don't you think?"

"Assuredly so, friend," I answered. "And what exactly do you make of this man Rumbottom?"

And so it began. Slowly, with tiny steps toward my target. Thrust and parry, dip and dive. It was easy enough, for I knew all the proper things to say, having studied my angel friend so intensely.

Finally, when the ground seemed properly prepared, I planted my seed.

"Have you noticed, then," said I, "that the man has never had the good news preached to him in a sober manner, never once had the opportunity to examine the facts in the clear light of day?"

"Well, no, I hadn't noticed," he replied. "But now that you mention it...Hmmm. It would be an interesting subject to investigate, just for curiosity's sake."

Ah, wouldn't it though?

The records were examined. The truth became plain. Harvey J. Rumbottom had never had a chance. Here stood a man, surrounded by Christian opulence, who had never in his entire life—incredible as it may sound—heard the least bit of a hint about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We two angels looked at each other with wide eyes of perplexity. Could it be—no, no perish the thought—that some—gulp—mistake had been made?

Impossible! Harvey J. Rumbottom would get his chance before he died. He'd make his choice like all the rest.

But hardened as he was, the outcome seemed certain now. A few years earlier, in his youth, things might have been different.

It didn't seem fair.

God hardens whom he will, you say, I know, I know.

But for some reason, in this particular instance—and this is the crux of the current matter before you—it just didn't seem fair.

I said goodbye to my fellow angel, for I saw no advantage in dragging him further into my scheme—for scheme it had now become. In point of fact I doubt very much if he would have endorsed my plan in the least. It's an action angel's lot, it seems, to waver in resolve, for a person's behavior is open to so many interpretations. Motives are always the unknown factor. Could be this, could be that—the action angel can never be sure. Words, though, are different. Words are precise and powerful. Was it not God's own words that created the very heavens? And was it not by the preaching of

words that God chose to reveal his great mystery? And has he not said that out of the fullness of a man's heart comes speech? Indeed so. And out of the fullness of Harvey J. Rumbottom's heart was pouring the most unspeakably putrid blasphemy known to man, a vile stench in God's nostrils.

What was needed, I reasoned, was nothing less than an angelic visitation. No, no, I wasn't thinking about sending the mighty Gabriel himself down in a fiery chariot. I had visions of something much simpler—a lesser underling making a polite social call, just to let Harvey J. know what he was talking himself into. No muss, no fuss, a mere aside on the theater stage, as it were.

Was that too much to ask?

Apparently so, according to my supervisor at Words Division when I told him. He was civil at least, I'll grant him that. He knew my record was unblemished; but he offered me no aid. "Try the Bureau of Lesser Miracles," he said as he handed me a pass, "but don't let it get around." He didn't want his whole department hounding him for special favors.

The Bureau of Lesser Miracles listened to my story without the least trace of surprise, (I suppose they see some extraordinary things in the course of a working day), but the three angels I talked to indicated that they couldn't help me. It sounded, in their opinion, to be a case more suited for the Bureau of Heavenly Revelation, the mighty Gabriel's own jurisdiction.

You can imagine with what trepidation I followed their advice into the hallowed halls of the Bureau of Heavenly Revelation. But all my anxiety was in vain. The angel at the desk at HR looked me over as though I were some wandering spirit with the crazy-fool notion of contacting a relative still living on earth. He wouldn't give me so much as the time of eternity. I left HR in a

cloud of despondency, but still determined not to give up on poor Harvey J. Rumbottom.

In desperation I tried the Bureau of Greater Miracles, and they, like their sister organization, at least gave me a receptive hearing. One angel there even went so far as to agree with my basic motivation; but, of course, the Bureau of Greater Miracles was concerned with more reality-shattering events than the simple visitation of a welder first-class in some Canadian backwater. Did he drive to work on a dog sled, they wondered? Nevertheless, one helpful angel suggested I try the Bureau of Lesser Miracles, and when I told him that I had already graced their premises, he thought long and hard as to where else I might turn. Finally he sent me over to Manuscript Preparation, a little-known Division in the Bureau of Antiquities. I stumbled over there with a sinking feeling in my heart and found it closed, of course. The Book had already gone to press.

I sat down outside the locked door and hung my head. This was the end, the absolute end. I seriously wondered whether it was a crime to cry in heaven.

But I never had the chance to find out, for a violent wave of frustration washed over me, galvanizing my spirit to action, and suddenly I had my answer, a solution born of desperation. I would make the visitation myself!

That's right, humble Herbert from Words Division, supernatural traveler. It hadn't been expressly forbidden, and certainly I'd tried my best to get proper clearance, hadn't I?

Well, time passed swiftly from then on, and certain skills had to be mastered as soon as possible. For one thing, I had no idea how to make myself visible to the human eye. (It's all a question of electromagnetic radiation, as it turns out. The retinal structures only respond to certain

wavelengths—oh, but you know all that.) Then there was speech preparation to consider, stage setting, proper timing. Life seemed suddenly a whirlwind.

I sweated tears in the library. I sidled unawares into classes at the Bureau of Heavenly Revelation. I ran sound tests and checked light frequencies. And this was all in addition to my regular duties at Words Division, which was a full-time job in itself. (Harvey J. Rumbottom was suffering insomnia at the time, keeping me up all hours of the night muttering obscenities to himself.)

Finally I felt ready.

It was a hot summer night. Harvey J. was walking home after his evening shift at the plant. (His car was in the shop, once again.) And there on a lonely stretch of road in Central Ontario, I made my play.

At first he fell to the ground, dazzled by not-too-subtle light display. I was still experimenting with different colors even then, and I can't be sure exactly what visible manifestation accompanied my presence. (The angels at HR later said that even a trace of visibility by an angel from Words Division was a miracle in itself.)

He stood up, his eyes agog.

"An alien," he said, and looked around wildly to see if anyone was in the general vicinity. We were alone, of course.

"I'm not an alien," I said, and knocked him to the ground again with the force of my voice. Apparently the volume was much too high. I tried to tone it down a bit—not with much success, I'm afraid.

Harvey J. stood up once again.

"Who are you, then?" he asked.

"I'm an angel," I answered, and saw the dust whip up around him. I tried to tone it down some more.

Harvey J. began to curse avidly, not only taking the Lord's name in vain, but even dragging his mother into it as well.

I took out his book and dutifully began writing it down.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm writing down what you say," I answered. "It's my job."

"You're kidding," he said.

"No. I'm not," I assured him, and noticed that my pattern of electromagnetic radiation was wavering. Perhaps I was changing color.

There were simply too many things to concentrate on, words to record, light frequencies to modulate—I honestly don't know how Gabriel manages it. In my consternation I dropped my notes, and had to stoop in a most unangelic manner to gather them up.

"Where are your wings?" Harvey J. asked suspiciously.

"I don't have any wings," I retorted. "Why should I need wings?"

"I thought all angels had wings," he replied.

"Yes, yes, and the Light-bearer wears red underwear," I said irritably, overcome by the tremendous effort needed to maintain my presence. My light frequencies were erratic, stroboscopic, my colors like a tumbling prism. It was a hopeless situation.

Harvey J. looked at me quizzically, his head cocked to one side like a balloon on a string.

I opened my mouth to speak, but could no longer control my air manipulation. Despite my best efforts, a noise like a thunderclap erupted from my lips, knocking Harvey J. Rumbottom to the ground with a blast of energy.

I decided right then and there to give up before I killed the poor fellow, so I relaxed into invisibility and went back to my office at the Bureau of Records to wallow in my ineptness.

That's how it happened, verbatim before God.

And now that the long ages have run their course, and the old earth and the old heaven have passed away, the time has finally arrived for my deeds to be examined by the court.

What is my crime, I ask you. Which of the King's laws have I broken? I tried my best to go through official channels, God knows. I felt I had a case. And now it's in your hands to decide.

Was I too impatient? Did I try to outguess God? Perhaps so, but does he not lead us both to will and to work for his own good pleasure? Did he not empower me to complete my seemingly impossible task?

Or have I in fact, as some might say, followed the rebellion of the Light-bearer and his horde, the road of disobedience and willful pride? I trust not, but am prepared to abide by your decision without appeal.

For you have been appointed over me. You have been chosen from among the holy host of heaven to sit in judgment on this matter, for you alone have proven yourselves worthy of such responsibility, by your unfailing devotion to God and your eternal love of the truth. No wiser or more discerning guardians could I appear in front of than those singled out by the King Himself.

And with that thought, let me rest my defense on the King's own words as recorded by His apostolic servant, for in these words I can only hope and trust now that my own books have been opened and my own imperfections exposed—that mercy triumphs over judgment.

Thank you.



His summation concluded, Herbert the angel resumed his seat before the heavenly tribunal and left his final destiny in their capable hands.

On the raised platform in front of him, a row of twelve judges stared down as they weighed his life in the balance, the twelve wise ones who had been chosen from all eternity to decide the fate of humble Herbert from the Bureau of Records, Words Division—the twelve pure and undefiled sages, complete in number and perfect in appearance. Harvey J. Rumbottom was the fourth one from the left.



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Steve Stanton is the founding editor of *Dreams & Visions* magazine and the Sky Songs anthology series. His short stories and articles have been published in Canada, Australia, England and USA.



Cover: "Cat Under the Jack Moon"
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Illustration: "Angel on Trial"
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Self-taught artist and writer; drawing came first, writing second. Her favorite genres are fantasy and sci-fi because of the depth of imagination.



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