

## Wonders of the Invisible World

by Patricia A McKillip

I am the angel sent to Cotton Mather. It took me some time to get his attention. He lay on the floor with his eyes closed; he prayed fervently, sometimes murmuring, sometimes shouting. Apparently the household was used to it. I heard footsteps pass his study door; a woman—his wife Abigail?—called to someone: "If your throat is no better tomorrow, we'll have Phillip pee in a cup for you to gargle." From the way the house smelled, Phillip didn't bother much with cups. Cotton Mather smelled of smoke and sweat and wet wool. Winter had come early. The sky was black, the ground was white, the wind pinched like a witch and whined like a starving dog. There was no color in the landscape and no mercy. Cotton Mather prayed to see the invisible world.

He wanted an angel.

"O Lord," he said, in desperate, hoarse, weary cadences, like a sick child talking itself to sleep. "Thou hast given angelic visions to Thy innocent children to defend them from their demons. Remember Thy humble servant, who prostrates himself in the dust, vile worm that I am, forsaking food and comfort and sleep, in humble hope that Thou might bestow upon Thy humble servant the blessing and hope at this harsh and evil time: a glimpse of Thy shadow, a flicker of light in Thine eye, a single word from Thy mouth. Show me Thy messengers of good who fly between the visible and invisible worlds. Grant me, O God, a vision."

I cleared my throat a little. He didn't open his eyes. The fire was dying down. I wondered who replenished it, and if the sight of Mather's bright, winged creature would surprise anyone, with all the witches, devils and demented goldfinches perched on rafters all over New England. The firelight spilling across the wide planks glowed just beyond his outstretched hand. He lay in dim lights and fluttering shadows, in the long, long night of history, when no one could ever see clearly after sunset, and witches and angels and living dreams trembled just beyond the fire.

"Grant me, O God, a vision."

I was standing in front of his nose. He was lost in days of fasting and desire, trying to conjure an angel out of his head. According to his writings, what he expected to see was the generic white male with wings growing out of his shoulders, fair-haired, permanently beardless, wearing a long white nightgown and a gold dinner plate on his head. This was what intrigued Durham, and why he had hired me: he couldn't believe that both good and evil in the Puritan imagination could be so banal.

But I was what Mather wanted: something as colorless and pure as the snow that lay like the hand of God over the earth, harsh, exacting, unambiguous. Fire, their salvation against the cold, was red and belonged to Hell.

"O Lord."

It was the faintest of whispers. He was staring at my feet.

They were bare and shining and getting chilled. The ring of diamonds in my halo contained controls for light, for holograms like my wings, a map disc, a local-history disc in case I got totally bewildered by events, and a recorder disc that had caught the sudden stammer in Mather's last word. He had asked for an angel; he got an angel. I wished he would quit staring at my feet and throw another log on the fire.

He straightened slowly, pushing himself off the floor while his eyes traveled upward. He was scarcely thirty at the time of the trials; he resembled his father at that age more than the familiar Pelham portrait of Mather in his sixties, soberly dressed, with a wig like a cream puff on his head, and a firm, resigned mouth. The young Mather had long dark hair, a spare, handsome, clean-shaven face, searching, credulous eyes. His eyes reached my face finally, cringing a little, as if he half expected a demon's red, leering face attached to the angel's body. But he found what he expected. He began to cry.

He cried silently, so I could speak. His writings are mute about much of the angel's conversation. Mostly it predicted Mather's success as a writer, great reviews and spectacular sales in America and Europe. I greeted him, gave him the message from God, quoted Ezekiel, and then got down to business. By then he had stopped crying, wiped his face with his dusty sleeve and cheered up at the prospect of fame.

"There are troubled children," I said, "who have seen me."

"They speak of you in their misery," he said gratefully. "You give them strength against evil."

"Their afflictions are terrible."

"Yes," he whispered.

"You have observed their torments."

"Yes."

"You have taken them into your home, borne witness to their complaints, tried to help them cast out their tormentors."

"I have tried."

"You have wrestled with the invisible world."

"Yes."

We weren't getting very far. He still knelt on the hard floor, as he had done for hours, perhaps days; he could see me more clearly than he had seen anything in the dark in his life. He had forgotten the fire. I tried to be patient. Good angels were beyond temperament, even while at war with angels who had disgraced themselves by exhibiting human characteristics. But the floorboards were getting very cold.

"You have felt the invisible chains about them," I prodded. "The invisible, hellish things moving beneath their bedclothes."

"The children cannot seem to stand my books," he said a little querulously, with a worried frown. "My writing sends them into convulsions. At the mere act of opening my books, they fall down as dead upon the floor. Yet how can I lead them gently back to God's truth if the truth acts with such violence against them?"

"It is not against them," I reminded him, "but against the devil, who," I added, inspired, "takes many shapes."

He nodded, and became voluble. "Last week he took the shape of thieves who stole three sermons from me. And of a rat—or something like a hellish rat—we could feel in the air, but not see."

"A rat."

"And sometimes a bird, a yellow bird, the children say—they see it perched on the fingers of those they name witches."

"And since they say it, it is so."

He nodded gravely. "God made nothing more innocent than children."

I let that pass. I was his delusion, and if I had truly been sent to him from God, then God and Mather agreed on everything.

"Have they—" this was Durham's suggestion—"not yet seen, the devil in the shape of a black horse who spews fire between its teeth, and is ridden by three witches, each more beautiful than the last?"

He stared at me, then caught himself imagining the witches and blinked. "No," he breathed. "No one has seen such a thing. Though the Shape of Goody Bishop in her scarlet bodice and her lace had been seen over the beds of honest married men."

"What did she do to them?"

"She hovered. She haunted them. For this and more she was hanged."

For wearing a color and inciting the imagination, she was hanged. I refrained from commenting that since her Shape had done the hovering, it was her Shape that should have been hanged. But it was almost worth my researcher's license. "In God's justice," I said piously, "her soul dwells." I had almost forgotten the fire; this dreary, crazed, malicious atmosphere was more chilling than the cold.

"She had a witchmark," Mather added. "The witch's teat." His eyes were wide, marveling; he had conjured witches as well as angels out of his imagination. I suppose it was easier, in that harsh world, to make demons out of your neighbors, with their imperfections, tempers, rheumy eyes, missing teeth, irritating habits and smells, than to find angelic beauty in them. But I wasn't there to judge Mather. I could hear Durham's intense voice: Imagination. Imagery. I want to know what they pulled out of their heads. They invented their devil, but all they could do was make him talk like a bird? Don't bother with a moral viewpoint. I want to know what Mather saw. This was the man who

believed that thunder was caused by the sulfurous farts of decaying vegetation. Why? Don't ask me why. You're a researcher. Go research.

Research the imagination. It was as obsolete as the appendix in most adults, except for those in whom, like the appendix, it became inflamed for no reason. Durham's curiosity seemed as aberrated as Mather's; they both craved visions. But in his world, Durham could afford the luxury of being crazed. In this world, only the crazed, the adolescent girls, the trial judges, Mather himself, were sane.

I was taking a moral viewpoint. But Mather was still talking, and the recorder was catching his views, not mine. I had asked Durham once, after an exasperating journey to some crowded, airless, fly-infested temple covered with phallic symbols to appear as a goddess, to stop hiring me; the Central Research Computer had obviously got its records mixed when it recommended me to him. Our historical viewpoints were thoroughly incompatible. "No, they're not," he had said obnoxiously, and refused to elaborate. He paid well. He paid very well. So here I was, in frozen colonial New England, listening to Cotton Mather talk about brooms.

"The witches ride them," he said, still wide-eyed. "Sometimes three to a besom. To their foul Witch's Sabbaths."

Their foul Sabbaths, he elaborated, consisted of witches gathering in some boggy pasture where the demons talked with the voices of frogs, listening to a fiendish sermon, drinking blood, and plotting to bring back pagan customs like dancing around a Maypole. I wondered if, being an angel of God, I was supposed to know all this already, and if Mather would wonder later why I had listened. Durham and I had argued about this, about the ethics and legalities of me pretending to be Mather's delusion.

"What's the problem?" he had asked. "You think the real angel is going to show up later?"

Mather was still speaking, in a feverish trance caused most likely by too much fasting, prayer, and mental agitation. Evil eyes, he was talking about, and "things" that were hairy all over. They apparently caused neighbors to blame one another for dead pigs, wagons stuck in potholes, sickness, lust and deadly boredom. I was getting bored myself, by then, and thoroughly depressed. Children's fingers had pointed at random, and wherever they pointed, they created a witch. So much for the imagination. It was malignant here, an instrument of cruelty and death.

"He did not speak to the court, neither to defend his innocence nor confess his guilt," Mather was saying solemnly. "He was a stubborn old man. They piled stones upon him until his tongue stuck out and he died. But he never spoke. They had already hanged his wife. He spoke well enough then, accusing her."

I had heard enough.

"God protect the innocent," I said, and surprised myself, for it was a prayer to something. I added, more gently, for Mather, blinking out of his trance, looked worried, as if I had accused him, "Be comforted. God will give you strength to bear all tribulations

in these dark times. Be patient and faithful, and in the fullness of time, you will be rewarded with the truth of your life."

Not standard Puritan dogma, but all he heard was "reward" and "truth." I raised my hand in blessing. He flung himself down to kiss the floor at my feet. I activated the controls in my halo and went home.

Durham was waiting for me at the Researchers' Terminus. I pulled the recorder disc out of my halo, fed it to the computer, and then stepped out of the warp chamber. While the computer analyzed my recording to see if I had broken any of one thousand, five hundred and sixty-three regulations, I took off my robe and my blond hair and dumped them and my halo into Durham's arms.

"Well?" he said, not impatient, just intent, not even seeing me as I pulled a skirt and tunic over my head. I was still cold, and worried about my researcher's license, which the computer would refuse to return if I had violated history. Durham had eyes like Cotton Mather's, I saw for the first time: dark, burning, but with a suggestion of humor in them. "What did you find? Speak to me, Nici."

"Nothing," I said shortly. "You're out several million credits for nothing. It was a completely dreary bit of history, not without heroism but entirely without poetry. And if I've lost my license because of this—I'm not even sure I understand what you're trying to do."

"I'm researching for a history of imaginative thought."

Durham was always researching unreadable subjects. "Starting when?" I asked tersely, pulling on a boot. "The cave paintings at Lascaux?"

"No art," he said. "More speculative than that. Less formal. Closer to chaos." He smiled, reading my mind. "Like me."

"You're a disturbed man, Durham. You should have your unconscious scanned."

"I like it the way it is: a bubbling little morass of unpredictable metaphors."

"They aren't unpredictable," I said. "They're completely predictable. Everything imaginable is accessible, and everything accessible has been imagined by the Virtual computer, which has already researched every kind of imaginative thought since the first bison got painted on a rock. That way nothing like what happened in Cotton Mather's time can happen to us. So—"

"*Wonders of the Invisible World*," Durham interrupted. He hadn't heard a word. "It's a book by Mather. He was talking about angels and demons. We would think of the invisible in terms of atomic particles. Both are unseen yet named, and immensely powerful—"

"Oh, stop. You're mixing atoms and angels. One exists, the other doesn't."

"That's what I'm trying to get at, Nici—the point where existence is totally

immaterial, where the passion, the belief in something creates a situation completely ruled by the will to believe."

"That's insanity."

He smiled again, cheerfully. He tended to change his appearance according to what he was researching; he wore a shimmering bodysuit that showed all his muscles, and milk-white hair. Except for the bulky build of his face and the irreverence in his eyes, he might have been Mather's angel. My more androgynous face worked better. "Maybe," he said. "But I find the desire, the passion, coupled with the accompanying imagery, fascinating."

"You are a throwback," I muttered. "You belong to some barbaric age when people imagined things to kill each other for." The computer flashed a light; I breathed a sigh of relief. Durham got his tape, and the computer's analysis; I retrieved my license.

"Next time—" Durham began.

"There won't be a next time." I headed for the door. "I'm sick of appearing as twisted pieces of people's imagination. And one of these days I'm going to find myself in court."

"But you do it so well," he said softly. "You even convince the Terminus computer."

I glared at him. "Just leave me alone."

"All right," he said imperturbably. "Don't call me, I'll call you."

I was tired, but I took the tube-walk home, to get the blood moving in my feet, and to see some light and color after that bleak, dangerous world. The moving walkway, encased in its clear tube, wound up into the air, balanced on its centipede escalator and station legs. I could see the gleaming city domes stretch like a long cluster of soap bubbles toward the afternoon sun, and I wondered that somewhere within the layers of time in this place there was a small port town on the edge of a vast, unexplored continent where Mather had flung himself down on his floorboards and prayed an angel out of himself.

He could see an angel here without praying for it. He could be an angel. He could soar into the eye of God if he wanted, on wings of gold and light. He could reach out, even in the tube-walk, punch in a credit number, plug into his implant or his wrist controls, and activate the screen above his head. He could have any reality on the menu, or any reality he could dream up, since everything imagined and imaginable and every combination of it had been programmed into the Virtual computer. And then he could walk out of the station into his living room and change the world all over again.

I had to unplug Brock when I got home; he had fallen asleep at the terminal. He opened heavy eyelids and yawned.

"Hi, Matrix."

"Don't call me that," I said mechanically. He grinned fleetingly and nestled deeper

into the bubble-chair. I sat down on the couch and pulled my boots off again. It was warm, in this time; I finally felt it. Brock asked, "What were you?"

Even he knew Durham that well. "An angel."

"What's that?"

"Look it up."

He touched the controls on his wrist absently. He was a calm child, with blue, clinical eyes and angelic hair that didn't come from me. He sprouted wings and a halo suddenly, and grunted. "What's it for?"

"It talks to God."

"What God?"

"In God We Trust. That God."

He grunted again. "Pre-Real."

I nodded, leaned back tiredly, and watched him, wondering how much longer he would be neat, attentive, curious, polite, before he shaved his head, studded his scalp and eyebrows with jewels and implants, got eye-implants that held no expression whatsoever, inserted a CD player into his earlobe, and never called me Matrix again. Maybe he would go live with his father. I hadn't seen him since Brook was born, but Brook knew exactly who he was, where he was, what he did. Speculation was unnecessary, except for aberrants like Durham.

The outercom signaled; half a dozen faces appeared onscreen: Brook's friends who lived in the station complex. They trooped in, settled themselves around Brook, and plugged into their wrists. They were playing an adventure game, a sort of space-chase, where they were intergalactic thieves raiding alien zoos of rare animals and selling them to illegal restaurants. The computer played the team of highly trained intergalactic space-patrollers. The thieves were constantly falling into black holes, getting burnt up speeding too fast into strange atmospheres, and ambushed by the wily patrollers. One of them, Indra, tried to outwit the computer by coming up with the most bizarre alien species she could imagine; the computer always gave her the images she wanted. I watched for a while. Then an image came into my head, of an old man in a field watching his neighbors pile stones on him until he could no longer breathe.

I got up, went into my office, and called Durham.

"I could have stopped it," I said tersely. He was silent, not because he didn't know what I was talking about, but because he did. "I was an angel from God. I could have changed the message."

"You wouldn't have come back," he said simply. It was true. I would have been abandoned there, powerless, a beardless youth with breasts in a long robe raving about the future, who would have become just one more witch for the children to condemn. He

added, "You're a researcher. Researchers don't get emotional about history. There's nothing left of that time but some old bones in a museum from where they dug them up to build a station complex. A gravestone with an angel on it, a little face with staring eyes, and a pair of cupid wings. What's to mope about? I put a bonus in your account. Go spend it somewhere."

"How much?"

He was silent again, his eyes narrowed slightly. "Not enough for you to go back. Go get drunk, Nici. This is not you."

"I'm haunted," I whispered, I thought too softly for him to hear. He shook his head, not impatiently.

"The worst was over by then, anyway. Heroics are forbidden to researchers. You know that. The angel Mather dreamed up only told him what he wanted to hear. Tell him anything else and he'd call you a demon and refuse to listen. You know all this. Why are you taking this personally? You didn't take being a goddess in that Hindu temple personally. Thank God," he added with an obnoxious chuckle. I grunted at him morosely and got rid of his face.

I found a vegetable bar in the kitchen, and wandered back into the living room. The space-thieves were sneaking around a zoo on the planet Hublatt. They were all imaging animals onscreen while their characters studied the specimens. "We're looking for a Yewsalope," Brock said intently. "Its eyeballs are poisonous, but if you cook them just right they look like boiled eggs to whoever you're trying to poison."

The animals were garish in their barred cells: purple, orange, cinnamon, polka-dotted, striped. There were walking narwhales, a rhinoceros horn with feet and eyes, something like an octopus made out of elephant trunks, an amorphous green blob that constantly changed shape.

"How will you know a Yewsalope when you see it?" I asked, fascinated with their color combinations, their imagery. Brock shrugged slightly.

"We'll know."

A new animal appeared in an empty cage: a tall, two-legged creature with long golden hair and wings made of feathers or light. It held on to the bars with its hands, looking sadly out. I blinked.

"You have an angel in your zoo."

I heard Brock's breath. Indra frowned. "It could fly out. Why doesn't it fly? Whose is it? Anyway, this zoo is only for animals. This looks like some species of human. It's illegal," she said, fastidiously for a thief, "on Hublatt."

"It's an angel," Brock said.

"What's an angel? Is it yours?"



Brock shook his head. They all shook their heads, eyes onscreen, wanting to move on. But the image lingered: a beautiful, melancholy figure, half human, half light, trapped and powerless behind its bars.

"Why doesn't it just fly?" Indra breathed. "It could just fly. Brock—"

"It's not mine," Brock insisted. And then he looked at me, his eyes wide, so calm and blue that it took me a moment to transfer my attention from their color to what they were asking.

I stared at the angel, and felt the bars under my hands. I swallowed, seeing what it saw: the long, dark night of history that it was powerless to change, to illumine, because it was powerless to speak except to lie.

"Matrix?" Brock whispered. I closed my eyes.

"Don't call me that."

When I opened my eyes, the angel had disappeared.