

## Mrs. McWilliams and the Lightning

Mark Twain

Well, sir, -- continued Mr. McWilliams, for this was not the beginning of his talk; -- the fear of lightning is one of the most distressing infirmities a human being can be afflicted with. It is mostly confined to women; but now and then you find it in a little dog, and sometimes in a man. It is a particularly distressing infirmity, for the reason that it takes the sand out of a person to an extent which no other fear can, and it can't be reasoned with, and neither can it be shamed out of a person. A woman who could face the very devil himself -- or a mouse -- loses her grip and goes all to pieces in front of a flash of lightning. Her fright is something pitiful to see.

Well, as I was telling you, I woke up, with that smothered and unlocatable cry of "Mortimer! Mortimer!" wailing in my ears; and as soon as I could scrape my faculties together I reached over in the dark and then said,--

"Evangeline, is that you calling? What is the matter? Where are you?"

"Shut up in the boot-closet. You ought to be ashamed to lie there and sleep so, and such an awful storm going on."

"Why, how can one be ashamed when he is asleep? It is unreasonable; a man can't be ashamed when he is asleep, Evangeline."

"You never try, Mortimer, -- you know very well you never try."

I caught the sound of muffled sobs.

That sound smote dead the sharp speech that was on my lips, and I changed it to--

"I'm sorry, dear, -- I'm truly sorry. I never meant to act so. Come back and--"

"MORTIMER!"

"Heavens! what is the matter, my love?"

"Do you mean to say you are in that bed yet?"

"Why, of course."

"Come out of it instantly. I should think you would take some little care of your life, for my sake and the children's, if you will not for your own."

"But my love--"

"Don't talk to me, Mortimer. You know there is no place so dangerous as a bed, in such a thunder-storm as this, -- all the books say that; yet there you would lie, and deliberately throw away your life, -- for goodness knows what, unless for the sake of arguing and arguing, and--"

"But, confound it, Evangeline, I'm not in the bed, now. I'm--"

[Sentence interrupted by a sudden glare of lightning, followed by a terrified little scream from Mrs. McWilliams and a tremendous blast of thunder.]

"There! You see the result. Oh, Mortimer, how can you be so profligate as to swear at such a time as this?"

"I didn't swear. And that was n't a result of it, any way. It would have come, just the same, if I had n't said a word; and you know very well, Evangeline, -- at least you ought to know, -- that when the atmosphere is charged with electricity--"

"Oh, yes, now argue it, and argue it, and argue it! -- I don't see how you can act so, when you know there is not a lightning-rod on the place, and your poor wife and children are absolutely at the mercy of Providence. What are you doing? -- lighting a match at such a time as this! Are you stark mad?"

"Hang it, woman, where's the harm? The place is as dark as the inside of an infidel, and--"

"Put it out! put it out instantly! Are you determined to sacrifice us all? You know there is nothing attracts lightning like a light. [Fzt! -- crash! boom -- boloom-boom-boom!] Oh, just hear it! Now you see what you've done!"

"No, I don't see what I've done. A match may attract lightning, for all I know, but it don't cause lightning, -- I'll go odds on that. And it didn't attract it worth a cent this time; for if that shot was levelled at my match, it was blessed poor marksmanship, -- about an average of none out of a possible million, I should say. Why, at Dollymount, such marksmanship as that--"

"For shame, Mortimer! Here we are standing right in the very presence of death, and yet in so solemn a moment you are capable of using such language as that. If you have no desire to -- Mortimer!"

"Well?"

"Did you say your prayers to-night?"

"I -- I -- meant to, but I got to trying to cipher out how much twelve times thirteen is, and--"

[Fzt! -- boom -- berroom -- boom! Bumble-umble bang -- SMASH!]

"Oh, we are lost, beyond all help! How could you neglect such a thing at such a time as this?"

"But it was n't `such a time as this.` There was n't a cloud in the sky. How could I know there was going to be all this rumpus and pow-wow about a little slip like that? And I don't think it's just fair for you to make so much out of it, any way, seeing it happens so seldom; I have n't missed before since I brought on that earthquake, four years ago."

"MORTIMER! How you talk! Have you forgotten the yellow fever?"

"My dear, you are always throwing up the yellow fever to me, and I think it is perfectly unreasonable. You can't even send a telegraphic message as far as Memphis without relays, so how is a little devotional slip of mine going to carry so far? I'll stand the earthquake, because it was in the neighborhood; but I'll be hanged if I'm going to be responsible for every blamed--"

[Fzt! -- BOOM berroom-boom! boom! -- BANG!]

"Oh, dear, dear, dear! I know it struck something, Mortimer. We never shall see the light of another day; and if it will do you any good to remember, when we are gone, that your dreadful language -- Mortimer!"

"WELL! What now?"

"Your voice sounds as if -- Mortimer, are you actually standing in front of that open fireplace?"

"That is the very crime I am committing."

"Get away from it, this moment. You do seem determined to bring destruction on us all. Don't you know that there is no better conductor for lightning than an open chimney? Now where have you got to?"

"I'm here by the window."

"Oh, for pity's sake, have you lost your mind? Clear out from there, this moment. The very children in arms know it is fatal to stand near a window in a thunder-storm. Dear, dear, I know I shall never see the light of another day. Mortimer?"

"Yes?"

"What is that rustling?"

"It's me."

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to find the upper end of my pantaloons."

"Quick! throw those things away! I do believe you would deliberately put on those clothes at such a time as this; yet you know perfectly well that all authorities agree that woolen stuffs attract lightning. Oh, dear, dear, it isn't sufficient that one's life must be in peril from natural causes, but you must do everything you can possibly think of to augment the danger. Oh, don't sing! What can you be thinking of?"

"Now where's the harm in it?"

"Mortimer, if I have told you once, I have told you a hundred times, that singing causes vibrations in the atmosphere which interrupt the flow of the electric fluid, and -- What on earth are you opening that door for?"

"Goodness gracious, woman, is there is any harm in that?"

"Harm? There's death in it. Anybody that has given this subject any attention knows that to create a draught is to invite the lightning. You have n't half shut it; shut it tight, -- and do hurry, or we are all destroyed. Oh, it is an awful thing to be shut up with a lunatic at such a time as this. Mortimer, what are you doing?"

"Nothing. Just turning on the water. This room is smothering hot and close. I want to bathe my face and hands."

"You have certainly parted with the remnant of your mind! Where lightning strikes any other substance once, it strikes water fifty times. Do turn it off. Oh, dear, I am sure that nothing in this world can save us. It does seem to me that -- Mortimer, what was that?"

"It was a da -- it was a picture. Knocked it down."

"Then you are close to the wall! I never heard of such imprudence! Don't you know that there's no better conductor for lightning than a wall? Come away from there! And you came as near as anything to swearing, too. Oh, how can you be so desperately wicked, and your family in such peril? Mortimer, did you order a feather bed, as I asked you to do?"

"No. Forgot it."

"Forgot it! It may cost you your life. If you had a feather bed, now, and could spread it in the middle of the room and lie on it, you would be perfectly safe. Come in here, -- come quick, before you have a chance to commit any more frantic indiscretions."

I tried, but the little closet would not hold us both with the door shut, unless we could be content to smother. I gasped awhile, then forced my way out. My wife called out,--

"Mortimer, something must be done for your preservation. Give me that German book that is on the end of the mantel-piece, and a candle; but don't light it; give me a match; I will light it in here. That book has some directions in it."

I got the book, -- at cost of a vase and some other brittle things; and the madam shut herself up with her candle. I had a moment's peace; then she called out,--

"Mortimer, what was that?"

"Nothing but the cat."

"The cat! Oh, destruction! Catch her, and shut her up in the wash-stand. Do be quick, love; cats are full of electricity. I just know my hair will turn white with this night's awful perils."

I heard the muffled sobbings again. But for that, I should not have moved hand or foot in such a wild enterprise in the dark.

However, I went at my task, -- over chairs, and against all sorts of obstructions, all of them hard ones, too, and most of them with sharp edges, -- and at last I got kitty cooped up in the commode, at an expense of over four hundred dollars in broken furniture and shins. Then these muffled words came from the closet:--

"It says the safest thing is to stand on a chair in the middle of the room, Mortimer; and the legs of the chair must be insulated, with non-conductors. That is, you must set the legs of the chair in glass tumblers. [Fzt! -- boom -- bang! -- smash!] Oh, hear that! Do hurry, Mortimer, before you are struck."

I managed to find and secure the tumblers. I got the last four, -- broke all the rest. I insulated the chair legs, and called for further instructions.

"Mortimer, it says, `Während eines Gewitters entferne man Metalle, wie z. B., Ringe, Uhren, Schlüssel, etc., von sich und halte sich auch nicht an solchen Stellen auf, wo viele Metalle bei einander liegen, oder mit andern Körpern verbunden sind, wie an Herden, Oefen, Eisengittern u. dgl.` What does that mean, Mortimer? Does it mean that you must keep metals about you, or keep them away from you?"

"Well, I hardly know. It appears to be a little mixed. All German advice is more or less mixed. However, I think that that sentence is mostly in the dative case, with a little genitive and accusative sifted in, here and there, for luck; so I reckon it means that you must keep some metals about you."

"Yes, that must be it. It stands to reason that it is. They are in the nature of lightning-rods, you know. Put on your fireman`s helmet, Mortimer; that is mostly metal."

I got it and put it on, -- a very heavy and clumsy and uncomfortable thing on a hot night in a close room. Even my night-dress seemed to be more clothing than I strictly needed.

"Mortimer, I think your middle ought to be protected. Won`t you buckle on your militia sabre, please?"

I complied.

"Now, Mortimer, you ought to have some way to protect your feet. Do please put on your spurs."

I did it, -- in silence, -- and kept my temper as well as I could.

"Mortimer, it says, `Das Gewitter läuten ist sehr gefährlich, weil die Glocke selbst, sowie der durch das Läuten veranlasste Luftzug und die Höhe des Thurmes den Blitz anziehen könnten.` Mortimer, does that mean that it is dangerous not to ring the church bells during a thunder-storm?"

"Yes, it seems to mean that, -- if that is the past participle of the nominative case singular, and I reckon it is. Yes, I think it means that on account of the height of the church tower and the absence of Luftzug it would be very dangerous (sehr gefährlich) not to ring the bells in time of a storm; and moreover, don`t you see, the very wording--"

"Never mind that, Mortimer; don`t waste the precious time in talk. Get the large dinner-bell; it is right there in the hall. Quick, Mortimer dear; we are almost safe. Oh, dear, I do believe we are going to be saved, at last!"

Our little summer establishment stands on top of a high range of hills, overlooking a valley. Several farm-houses are in our neighborhood, -- the nearest some three or four hundred yards away.

When I, mounted on the chair, had been clanging that dreadful bell a matter of seven or eight minutes, our shutters were suddenly torn open from without, and a brilliant bull`s-eye lantern was thrust in at the window, followed by a hoarse inquiry:--

"What in the nation is the matter here?"

The window was full of men`s heads, and the heads were full of eyes that stared wildly at my night-dress and my warlike accoutrements.

I dropped the bell, skipped down from the chair in confusion, and said,--

"There is nothing the matter, friends, -- only a little discomfort on account of the thunder-storm. I was trying to keep off the lightning."

"Thunder-storm? Lightning? Why, Mr. McWilliams, have you lost your mind? It is a beautiful starlight night; there has been no storm."

I looked out, and I was so astonished I could hardly speak for a while. Then I said,--

"I do not understand this. We distinctly saw the glow of the flashes through the curtains and shutters, and heard the thunder."

One after another of those people lay down on the ground to laugh, -- and two of them died. One of the survivors remarked,--

"Pity you did n`'t think to open your blinds and look over to the top of the high hill yonder. What you heard was cannon; what you saw was the flash. You see, the telegraph brought some news, just at midnight: Garfield`s nominated, -- and that`s what`s the matter!"

Yes, Mr. Twain, as I was saying in the beginning (said Mr. McWilliams), the rules for preserving people against lightning are so excellent and so innumerable that the most incomprehensible thing in the world to me is how anybody ever manages to get struck.

So saying, he gathered up his satchel and umbrella, and departed; for the train had reached his town.