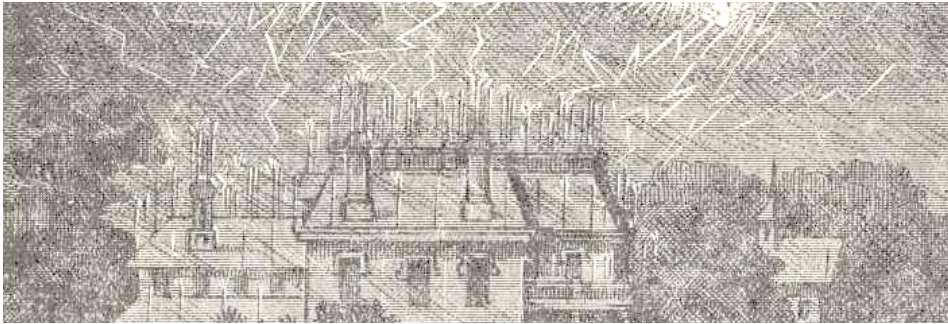


Fiction

Mrs. McWilliams And The Lightning



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! 145Mortimer!” 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 146you 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 wasn't a result of it, any way. It would have come, just the same, if I hadn't said a word; and you know very well, Evangeline,—at least you ought to have known,—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—bloom-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 148average 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 wasn't ‘such a time as this.’ There wasn't a cloud in the sky. How could I know there was going to be all this rumpus and powwow 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 149haven'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?”

150“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, 151dear, 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 haven'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.”

152“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?”