

MRS. McWILLIAMS AND THE LIGHTNING

by

Mark Twain

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

MARK TWAIN (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) was born in Missouri in 1835. His childhood, about which he wrote in his two best-known novels, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, was spent along the banks of the Mississippi River. His early manhood is depicted in *Life on the Mississippi*, telling of his adventures on the river boats of that era. During the Civil War he went out west to Nevada and California and worked as a newspaperman. His most famous short story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County", was written during this period of his life. It helped to launch his career as a leading author and humorist. Shortly after publication of this successful story, Twain began a career of lecturing, at which he did very well.

No one has given us a better picture of his era than Mark Twain. Through humor and satire he permitted the reader of his own day as well as future readers to see the folly of much that made up the life of the nineteenth century. He had no patience with falsehood and pretense.

In 1870, having fallen in love with her picture before he even met her, Twain married Olivia Langdon, of Elmira, New York. Some critics believe that his wife's puritanical character had its influence on his later writing. In any case, some of his best works, such as *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, were written after he married.

Twain's earlier works are an expression of his carefree attitude and love of life. His later writings, however, reflect a pessimism which came as a result of tragedy in his family, financial difficulties and disillusionment at what he saw about him. "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg" and "The Mysterious Stranger" show a bitterness not found in earlier writings.

Mark Twain had come in, he said, with Halley's Comet (1834), and he would probably go out with it. He died in 1910, the same year that the famous comet reappeared.

PRODUCTION NOTES

CAST:	Announcer	Man or woman
	Narrator	Man or woman; can be the same person as the announcer
	Mortimer McWilliams	A quiet, sensible man who tries to please his wife and keep peace in the family at all costs
	Evangeline McWilliams	A hysterical wife; she is, of course, exaggerated for comic effect
	Bertha McWilliams	A young girl (Can be a son rather than a daughter)
	Frank Watkins	A neighbor (Can be women rather than men)
	Dick Freeman	A neighbor
MUSIC:	Light and humorous	

SOUND:

SCRIPT

ANNOUNCER: Today's program is based on a short story by one of America's best-loved authors, Samuel Clemens, known to the world as Mark Twain. We present his story, "Mrs. McWilliams and the Lightning".

MUSIC: (up and out)

NARRATOR: Some people are afraid of the dark. Some people are afraid of animals. Other people are frightened by electrical storms. Mrs. McWilliams was one of these. She was afraid of thunder and lightning.

One night, many years ago, Mrs. McWilliams' husband was awakened by shouts of . . .

EVANGELINE: *(fade in)* Mortimer! Mortimer!

MORTIMER: *(sleepy)* Huh? What? Who is it?

EVANGELINE: Mortimer! Wake up! Wake up!

MORTIMER: Evangeline! Where are you? I hear your voice but I can't see you.

EVANGELINE: Here . . . in the clothes closet, with Bertha.

MORTIMER: What are you doing in the closet? It must be midnight.

SOUND: *(crash of thunder)*

EVANGELINE: *(screams)* Do you hear that? That's why we're in the clothes closet. Bertha, are you all right, dear?

BERTHA: Yes, Mama. I'm all right.

MORTIMER: What *are* you talking about, Evangeline?

EVANGELINE: Mortimer, you must be deaf and blind, too. I'm talking about the storm. About the thunder and lightning! That's what I'm talking about!

MORTIMER: Oh, that.

SOUND: *(thunder)*

EVANGELINE: It's getting worse. The house is going to get hit. And we'll all be killed. I know we will! Bertha, are you all right?

BERTHA: Yes, Mother. I told you a minute ago that I was.

EVANGELINE: Brave child. Keeping her courage up for her mother's sake. Mortimer. What are you doing?

MORTIMER: I'm not doing anything. I'm lying here in bed. Same place I was a few minutes ago.

EVANGELINE: Lying in bed? Mortimer McWilliams! That's the most dangerous place to be.

MORTIMER: Dangerous?

EVANGELINE: All the books say so! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, sleeping. Any minute we could be struck by lightning.

MORTIMER: How can I be ashamed when I'm asleep?

EVANGELINE: You never try, Mortimer. You know very well you don't even try.

MORTIMER: I'm sorry, Evangeline. Bertha, are you all right, dear?

BERTHA: Yes, Papa. It's awfully hot here in the closet, though.

MORTIMER: I'll open the window and let in some fresh air.

EVANGELINE: Mortimer McWilliams, don't touch that window!

BERTHA: But Mama, it's so hot here that I can hardly breathe!

EVANGELINE: It won't hurt you not to breathe for a few minutes, Bertha. It *will* hurt you if a bolt comes through the roof. Don't touch that window, Mortimer!

MORTIMER: All right, my dear. I'll just come into the closet with you and Bertha.

EVANGELINE: No room. The two of us are crowded as it is. We'll never live through this storm. If we do, you'll have to remodel the closet. Then we'll have enough room for the whole family. Tell me, where are you now, Mortimer? Still in bed?

MORTIMER: No, Evangeline, I'm not in bed.

EVANGELINE: Are you standing by the window?

MORTIMER: No, I'm not standing by the window. I'm looking for my shoes.

EVANGELINE: Did you light a match?

MORTIMER: Of course I did. I can't find my shoes in the dark, can I?

EVANGELINE: Other husbands would. Other husbands would want to save their families. Mortimer McWilliams, have you gone crazy? There's nothing that attracts lightning like light. It's the worst thing you could do. Put it out immediately.

SOUND: *(thunder)*

EVANGELINE: Hear that? I'm sure that match caused the lightning.

MORTIMER: I'm sorry, Evangeline.

EVANGELINE: You're sorry! You'll be sorrier when your wife and daughter lie dead in here.

BERTHA: Mama! Don't talk that way! You scare me.

EVANGELINE: Well, it's true!

MORTIMER: Evangeline, if you are lying dead in there, then I'll be lying dead in here. We'll all go together when we go. Just like in the song.

EVANGELINE: This is a fine time to make jokes, Mortimer McWilliams!

MORTIMER: Well, it's true.

EVANGELINE: Where are you now? Back in bed?

MORTIMER: No, Evangeline, I'm not back in bed. I'm putting my clothes on.

SOUND: *(thunder)*

EVANGELINE: Putting your clothes on? Have you lost your mind completely? Take those clothes right off! You know very well that wool attracts lightning.

MORTIMER: All right, if you say so. *(begins to sing to himself)*

EVANGELINE: Is that you singing, Mortimer?

MORTIMER: Yes, Evangeline. I don't have much of a voice, but I like to try.

EVANGELINE: What have I told you a thousand times? Singing causes vibrations. Vibrations interrupt the flow of electricity . . . and . . . oh well, it's too complicated to explain. Where are you now, Mortimer? Are you by the window?

MORTIMER: No, Evangeline, I'm not by the window. I'm by the fireplace.

EVANGELINE: You're doing these things to annoy me. Even Bertha knows that that's the worst spot.

BERTHA: That's not true, Mama. I never heard of such a thing before.

EVANGELINE: Yes you did. You just forgot. Mortimer! Get away from the fireplace this instant! It's the best conductor for lightning there is!

SOUND: *(thunder)*

MORTIMER: Where can I go? Everywhere I move you tell me to go some place else!

SOUND: *(cat meows loudly)*

EVANGELINE: Mortimer! What was that noise?

MORTIMER: Only the cat. I stepped on its tail.

EVANGELINE: The cat?

BERTHA: Oh, Mama. Let's bring Smokey in here with us. He won't take up much room.

EVANGELINE: If that cat comes in here I'm going out! Mortimer! Catch Smokey and put him down in the cellar. Cats are full of electricity.

SOUND: (*thunder*)

MORTIMER: All right, Evangeline.

BERTHA: But Mama! Smokey hates the cellar!

EVANGELINE: He likes to live, too. If he knows what's good for him he'll like the cellar for a few minutes.

SOUND: (*door open . . . cat meows . . . door closes*)

MORTIMER: There. I've put Smokey in the cellar.

EVANGELINE: Mortimer. Did you order that feather bed I asked you to?

MORTIMER: I forgot. I'll do it the first thing in the morning.

EVANGELINE: We'll all be dead in the morning! Your forgetfulness may cost your life! If you had a feather bed you could lie on it. You'd be perfectly safe.

MORTIMER: I'm sorry.

EVANGELINE: It's too late to be sorry.

SOUND: (*thunder*)

MORTIMER: That's the strangest thunder I ever heard. The lightning looks very odd, too. I'm going to open the curtains and look out the window.

EVANGELINE: Don't you go near that window! How many times do I have to tell you?

MORTIMER: Very well.

EVANGELINE: Bring me that book from the mantelpiece . . . the big, red one.

MORTIMER: How can I tell if it's red?

EVANGELINE: Don't worry about the color. It's the only book on the mantelpiece.

MORTIMER: How are you going to read it?

EVANGELINE: I'll light a candle.

MORTIMER: But Evangeline, you just told me not to!

EVANGELINE: In here where there are no windows it'll be perfectly safe. Give me the candle and some matches. I'll light it in here. Where's the book?

MORTIMER: Here it is. What do you want the book for at a time like this?

EVANGELINE: It's a science book. It tells what to do in a storm.

MORTIMER: Why didn't you think of this before?

EVANGELINE: Now listen to this and do what the book says. Bertha, you hold the candle for me so I can read.

BERTHA: Yes, Mama.

EVANGELINE: It says to stand on a chair in the middle of the room. The legs of the chair must be insulated. Get four water glasses, Mortimer. Hurry, before you get struck.

SOUND: (*thunder*)

MORTIMER: All right, Evangeline. I've got the chair legs in water glasses.

EVANGELINE: I can't see this part too well. Hold the candle closer, Bertha. I *think* it says to keep something metal near you . . . or does it say to keep metal things away from you? I'm not sure. Well, it seems reasonable to keep metal near you.

MORTIMER: Evangeline, I'm not sure about that.

EVANGELINE: Put on your fireman's helmet, Mortimer. That'll be just the thing!

MORTIMER: All right, Evangeline. But it doesn't seem right to me.

EVANGELINE: Do it anyway! The book says so. It also says it's dangerous not to ring the church bells.

MORTIMER: *Not* to ring the church bells?

EVANGELINE: It has something to do with the height of the church tower.

MORTIMER: It does?

EVANGELINE: Well, we don't have a church tower but we do have a dinner bell. Quick, Mortimer, get it. Now climb on the chair and put on your helmet. Now start ringing the bell.

MORTIMER: Evangeline, this is going too far!

EVANGELINE: Do as I say!

MORTIMER: Very well, but I feel like a fool.

SOUND: *(bell begins ringing)*

EVANGELINE: Louder!

SOUND: *(thunder) (bell continues ringing)*

MORTIMER: *(shouting)* Is that loud enough?

EVANGELINE: Ring the bell as loud as you can!

BERTHA: Mother, my head is aching from all that noise!

SOUND: *(banging on door)*

EVANGELINE: What's that?

SOUND: *(door opens . . . bell stops ringing)*

FRANK: Mortimer McWilliams! What's going on here?

DICK: What are you doing up there on that chair, Mortimer? At one o'clock in the morning? And why are you ringing that bell?

EVANGELINE: Who is it, Mortimer? I hear voices.

MORTIMER: It's Frank Watkins and Dick Freeman.

EVANGELINE: What do they want?

FRANK: We came to see what the noise was, Mrs. McWilliams.

DICK: We thought someone might be in trouble here.

EVANGELINE: We are in trouble. Don't you hear that thunder and see the lightning? Get inside and close the door before we all get killed!

FRANK: Thunder?

DICK: Lightning?

EVANGELINE: It's been going on for over an hour now.

MORTIMER: Evangeline says that if you don't ring a bell the situation can be bad.

FRANK: So that's why you're up there ringing a bell!

MORTIMER: That's right.

DICK: Well, I don't know what made you think there was a storm.

FRANK: Open the curtains and look out. It's one of the clearest evenings we've had all year . . . not a cloud in the sky.

EVANGELINE: But we could see the lightning.

BERTHA: And we heard the thunder.

DICK: Well, that was the big cannon on the hill.

MORTIMER: The cannon?

FRANK: That's right. Garfield's been elected President of the United States. We got the news at midnight. The boys are shooting the cannon to let everyone know.

EVANGELINE: Well, I never would have thought it! Mortimer, come down off that chair. Put the dinner bell away. You look ridiculous up there!

MUSIC: *(up and under)*

ANNOUNCER: You have just heard an adaptation of Mark Twain's short story, "Mrs. McWilliams and the Lightning". Participating in today's program were:

- as the Narrator
- as Mortimer McWilliams
- as Evangeline McWilliams
- as Bertha McWilliams
- as Frank Watkins
- as Dick Freeman

Your announcer has been