

THE LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

by HERMAN MELVILLE

adapted for the stage by WALTER WYKES

CHARACTERS

ZECHARIAH

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

PLACE

A mountain cottage

TIME

1856

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THE LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

[A mountain cottage. ZECHARIAH stands smoking upon his hearth-stone, listening contentedly as scattered bolts of lightning boom overhead and crash down among the valleys, every bolt followed by zigzag irradiations, and swift slants of sharp rain, which audibly ring, like a charge of spear-points, on his low shingled roof. After a few moments, his meditation is interrupted by a knock at the door.]

ZECHARIAH

Who's there?

[No answer. Only another doleful knock, like the undertaker's clatter. He opens the door, revealing the LIGHTNING-ROD MAN. A lean, gloomy figure, his hair is dark and lank, mattedly streaked over his brow. His sunken pitfalls of eyes are ringed by indigo halos, and play with an innocuous sort of lightning: the gleam without the bolt. The whole man is dripping. He carries in his hand a strange-looking walking-stick.]

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Good day, sir.

ZECHARIAH

Good day.

[Pause.]

A fine thunder-storm.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Fine? Awful!

ZECHARIAH

You're soaking wet. Come in.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Thank you.

ZECHARIAH

Stand over here—by the fire.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Not for the world!

[The LIGHTNING-ROD MAN plants himself precisely in the center of the cottage. Still dripping, he stands in a puddle on the bare oak floor, his strange walking-stick resting vertically at his side.]

A polished copper rod, four feet long, it is lengthwise attached to a neat wooden staff, by insertion into two balls of greenish glass, ringed with copper bands. The metal rod terminates at the top tripodwise, in three keen tines, brightly gilt.]

ZECHARIAH

[Bowing politely and indicating the walking-stick.]

Have I, sir, the honor of a visit from that illustrious god, Jupiter Tonans? So stood he in the Greek statue of old, grasping the lightning-bolt. If you be he, or his viceroy, I have to thank you for this noble storm you've brewed among our mountains. Listen: That was a glorious peal. Ah, to a lover of the majestic, it is a good thing to have the Thunderer himself in one's cottage. The thunder grows finer for that. But pray be seated. This old rush-bottomed arm-chair, I grant, is a poor substitute for your evergreen throne on Olympus; but, condescend to rest yourself.

[The LIGHTNING-ROD MAN eyes him, half in wonder, and half in a strange sort of horror; but does not move a foot.]

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

What?

ZECHARIAH

Nothing. Never mind.

[Pause.]

Do be seated; you'll want to dry off before going out again.

[He places the chair invitingly next to the hearth, where a little fire has been kindled. But the LIGHTNING-ROD MAN does not budge.]

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Forgive me, sir, but instead of accepting your invitation to be seated on the hearth there, I must solemnly warn you, that you had best accept mine, and stand with me here—in the middle of the room.

[Lightning. Thunder.]

Good heavens! There is another of those awful crashes. I warn you, sir, quit the hearth.

ZECHARIAH

[Taking up his pipe again and settling on the hearth-stone.]

Mr. Jupiter Tonans, I stand very well here.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Are you so horridly ignorant as not to know, that by far the most dangerous part of a house, during such a terrific tempest as this, is the fire-place?

ZECHARIAH

[Involuntarily stepping upon the first board next to the stone.]

Nay, I did not know that.

[With this, the LIGHTNING-ROD MAN assumes such a smug and unpleasant air of successful admonition, that--quite involuntarily again--ZECHARIAH steps back upon the hearth, and throws himself into the most erect, proudest posture he can command.]

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

For Heaven's sake, for Heaven's sake, get off the hearth! Know you not, that the heated air and soot are conductors;--to say nothing of those immense iron fire-dogs? Quit the spot--I conjure--I command you.

ZECHARIAH

Mr. Jupiter Tonans, I am not accustomed to be commanded in my own house.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Why do you insist on calling me by that pagan name? Your profanity does nothing to dispel the present terror.

ZECHARIAH

Sir, will you be so good as to state your business? If you seek shelter from the storm, you are welcome, so long as you be civil; but if you come on business, open it forthwith. Who are you?

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

[Softening his tone.]

I am a dealer in lightning-rods. My special business is—

[Lightning. Thunder.]

Merciful heaven! what a crash!--Have you ever been struck--your premises, I mean? No? Quite fortunate. Nevertheless, it's best to be prepared.

[He rattles his metallic staff on the floor significantly.]

Nature provides no fortified castles in a thunder-storm; yet, say but the word, and of this cottage I can make a Gibraltar by a few waves of this wand. Hark, what Himalayas of concussions!

ZECHARIAH

You interrupted yourself; your special business you were about to speak of.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

My special business is to travel the country for orders for lightning-rods. This is my specimen-rod. I have the best references. In Criggan last month, I put up three-and-twenty rods on only five buildings.

ZECHARIAH

Wasn't it at Criggan last week, Saturday, I believe, that the steeple, the big elm, and the assembly-room cupola were all struck? Any of your rods there?

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Not on the tree and cupola, but the steeple—yes.

ZECHARIAH

Of what use is your rod, then?

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Of what use?! Why, sir, it can mean the difference between life and death! Unfortunately, my workman was careless. In fitting the rod to the top of the steeple, he allowed a part of the metal to graze the tin sheeting. Hence the accident. Not my fault, but his. Hark!

ZECHARIAH

That clap burst quite loud enough to be heard without finger-pointing—thank you. Did you hear of the event at Montreal last year? A servant girl struck at her bed-side with a rosary in her hand; the beads being metal. Does your beat extend into the Canadas?

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

No. And I hear that there, iron rods only are in use. They should have mine, which are copper. Iron is easily fused. Then they draw out the rod so slender, that it has not body enough to conduct the full electric current. The metal melts; the building is destroyed. My copper rods never act so. Those Canadians are fools. Some of them knob the rod at the top, which risks a deadly explosion, instead of imperceptibly carrying down the current into the earth, as this sort of rod does. Mine is the only true rod. Look at it. Only one dollar a foot.

ZECHARIAH

This abuse of your own calling in another might make one distrustful with respect to yourself.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Hark! The thunder becomes less muttering. It is nearing us, and nearing the earth, too. Hark! One crammed crash! All the vibrations made one by nearness. Another flash. Hold!

[He suddenly leans intently forward towards the window, with his right fore and middle fingers on his left wrist.]

Crash! only three pulses--less than a third of a mile off--yonder, somewhere in that wood. I passed three stricken oaks there, ripped out new and glittering. The oak draws lightning more than other timber, having iron in solution in its sap. Your floor here seems oak.

ZECHARIAH

Heart-of-oak. From the peculiar time of your calling, I suppose you purposely select stormy weather for your journeys. When the thunder is roaring, you deem it an hour peculiarly suited to producing impressions favorable to your trade.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Hark!--Awful!

ZECHARIAH

Yes. It's terrible. Perhaps we should huddle together for safety.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Mock, if you must. But when one has witnessed, as I have, the terrible death and destruction that can be wrought by Mother Nature, one learns to tread with care.

ZECHARIAH

And yet, while common men choose fair weather for their travels, you choose thunder-storms—

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

I travel in thunder-storms, true; but not without particular precautions such as only a lightning-rod man may know. Hark! Quick--look at my specimen rod. Only one dollar a foot.

ZECHARIAH

A very fine rod, I dare say. But what are these particular precautions of yours? I'm curious. Tell me while I close the shutters; the rain is beating through the sash. I'll just bar it up.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Are you mad?! Don't you know that iron bar is a swift conductor?! Desist at once!

ZECHARIAH

All right, I'll simply close the shutters, then, and call my son to bring a wooden bar instead. Pray, touch the bell-pull there.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Are you frantic? That bell-wire might blast you. Never touch bell-wire in a thunder-storm, nor ring a bell of any sort!

ZECHARIAH

Nor those in belfries? Pray tell, where and how may one be safe in a time like this? Is there any part of my house I may touch with hopes of my life?

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

There is; but not where you now stand. Come away from the wall. The current will sometimes run down a wall, and--a man being a better conductor than a wall--it would leave the wall and run into him. Swoop! That must have fallen very nigh. That must have been globular lightning.

ZECHARIAH

Very probably. Tell me at once, which is, in your opinion, the safest part of this house?

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

This room, and this one spot in it where I stand. Come hither.

ZECHARIAH

The reasons first.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Hark!--after the flash the gust--the sashes shiver--the house, the house!--Come hither to me!

ZECHARIAH

The reasons, if you please.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Come hither at once!

ZECHARIAH

Thank you, but I'm quite comfortable here on the hearth. And now, Mr. Lightning-rod-man, in the pauses of the thunder, be so good as to tell me your reasons for esteeming this one room of the house the safest, and your own one stand-point there the safest spot in it.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Your house is a one-storied house, with an attic and a cellar; this room is between. Hence its comparative safety. Because lightning sometimes passes from the clouds to the earth, and sometimes from the earth to the clouds. Do you comprehend? And I choose the middle of the room, because if the lightning should strike the house at all, it would come down the chimney or walls; so, obviously, the further you are from them, the better. Come hither to me, now.

ZECHARIAH

Presently. Something you just said, instead of alarming me, has strangely inspired confidence.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

What have I said?

ZECHARIAH

You said that sometimes lightning flashes from the earth to the clouds.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Aye, the returning-stroke, as it is called; when the earth, being overcharged with the fluid, flashes its surplus upward.

ZECHARIAH

The returning-stroke; that is, from earth to sky. Better and better. But come here on the hearth and dry yourself.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

I am better here, and better wet.

ZECHARIAH

Better wet?! Even I know that water is a conductor!

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

It is the safest thing you can do--Hark, again!--to get yourself thoroughly drenched in a thunder-storm. Wet clothes are, indeed, better conductors than the body; and so, if the lightning strike, it might pass down the wet clothes without touching the body. The storm deepens again. Have you a rug in the house? Rugs are non-conductors. Get one, that I may stand on it here, and you, too. The skies blacken--it is dusk at noon. Hark!--the rug, the rug!

[ZECHARIAH takes a rolled-up rug from the corner of the room and tosses it to the LIGHTNING-ROD MAN even as the hooded mountains seem close to tumbling into the cottage.]

ZECHARIAH

[Resuming his place near the hearth.]

And now, since our being dumb will not help us, let me hear your precautions in traveling during thunder-storms.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Wait till this one is passed.

ZECHARIAH

Nay, proceed with the precautions. You stand in the safest possible place according to your own account. Go on.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Briefly, then. I avoid pine-trees, high houses, lonely barns, upland pastures, running water, flocks of cattle and sheep, a crowd of men. If I travel on foot--as to-day--I do not walk fast; if in my buggy, I touch not its back or sides; if on horseback, I dismount and lead the horse. But of all things, I avoid tall men.

ZECHARIAH

Do I dream? Man avoid man? And in time of danger, too!

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

Tall men in a thunder-storm I avoid. Are you so grossly ignorant as not to know, that the height of a six-footer is sufficient to discharge an electric cloud upon him? Are not lonely Kentuckians, ploughing, smit in the unfinished furrow? Nay, if the six-footer stand by running water, the cloud will sometimes select him as its conductor to that running water. Hark! Sure, yon black pinnacle is split. Yes, a man is a good conductor. The lightning goes through and through a man, but only peels a tree. But sir, you have kept me so long answering your questions, that I have not yet come to business. Will you order one of my rods? Look at this specimen one? See: it is of the best of copper. Copper's the best conductor. Your house is low; but being upon the mountains, that lowness does not one whit depress it. You mountaineers are most exposed. In mountainous countries the lightning-rod man should have most business. Look at the specimen, sir. One rod will answer for a house so small as this. Look over these recommendations. Only one rod, sir; cost, only twenty dollars. Hark! There go all the granite Taconics and Hoosics dashed together like pebbles. By the sound, that must have struck something. An elevation of five feet above the house, will protect twenty feet radius all about the rod. Only twenty dollars, sir--a dollar a foot. Hark!--Dreadful!--Will you order? Will you buy? Shall I put down your name? Think of being a heap of charred offal, like a haltered horse burnt in his stall; and all in one flash!

ZECHARIAH

You pretended envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary to and from Jupiter Tonans, you mere man who come here to put you and your pipestem between clay and sky, do you think that because you can strike a bit of green light from the Leyden jar, that you can thoroughly avert the supernal bolt? Your rod rusts, or breaks, and where are you? Who has empowered you, you Tetzels, to peddle round your indulgences from divine ordinations? The hairs of our heads are numbered, and the days of our lives. In thunder as in sunshine, I stand at ease in the hands of my God. False negotiator, away! See, the scroll of the storm is rolled back; the house is unharmed; and in the blue heavens I read in the rainbow, that the Deity will not, of purpose, make war on man's earth.

LIGHTNING-ROD MAN

[His face blackening.]

Impious wretch! Do you think your ignorance will protect you?! Your fairy tales?!

[The LIGHTNING-ROD MAN springs upon the ZECHARIAH, brandishing his tri-forked rod.]

I will publish your infidel notions! You'll be the laughing stock of—

[ZECHARIAH seizes the lightning-rod and snaps it in two.]

My ... my rod! What have you done to my—

[ZECHARIAH drags the LIGHTNING-ROD MAN, kicking and screaming, out of the door and, returning, flings his copper scepter after him. As he takes his place, once more, upon the hearth, there is a

sudden flash of lightning, followed by a deafening roar. ZECHARIAH hesitates—then moves to the center of the room.]

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