

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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weather prediction

by . . . Evelyn E. Smith

Passman couldn't remember phone numbers. But his faulty dialing gave him a tip on the weather that came from pretty high up!

GEORGE PASSMAN'S wife had often told him he ought to have his memory trained because he was so bad about telephone numbers. Even after someone would carefully write a number down for him, he was apt to mix up the figures in dialing, so that he seldom got the person he wanted.

More often he got a harsh noise indicating that the telephone company disapproved of the combination of letters and figures he had just evolved. This trouble with the telephone had been a constant source of friction between him and his wife during the twelve uneventful years of their marriage.

"Please, George," Elinor begged, as she sat before the dressing table dragging her dull blonde hair into a Psyche knot at the nape of her neck, "see if you can't get it right just this once. WEather 6-1212; that's W-E."

"I know, I know," George said irritably.

And he *did* know, he *did* understand—up to the moment he got his hands on the telephone. Then something went wrong. Friends had often suggested that he try psychoanalysis, but Elinor had re-

Few writers excel Evelyn E. Smith in the difficult art of instilling a witty and rapier-like irony into stories as innocent of guile as a rosy cherub at a flower show. How, for instance, could the innocence of Mr. Passman have been surpassed, until he latched on to something as big as the universe of stars?

pudiated the suggestion indignantly, knowing that analysts tended to blame the wife for whatever was wrong with the husband, and not wanting George to get any ideas.

Although there was an extension on the table between the beds, George went to the phone in the living room, carefully shutting the door between. Elinor knew that it made him nervous to have anyone watch him in the act, and wondered what he did in the office. Was he able to conquer his phobia—or whatever it was—there, or did he delegate all telephoning to his secretary.

She had finished dressing when he came back ten minutes later. "You might have given me the weather report first," she observed, looking pointedly at the shaker and glasses he carried on a small table tray.

He poured two drinks. "Going to be a storm tonight," he announced.

"But, George, that's impossible! There isn't a cloud in sight. And the sun's been just—pouring all day."

"Look, I didn't make up the weather report. All I did was call the telephone company and that's what I was told."

"There must be some mistake." Elinor reached for the extension and dialed while he poured himself a second drink.

She hung up and looked at him. "Tonight fair and slightly cooler," she quoted, "with a low of

fifty-eight degrees. Barometer rising . . ." George, if you got the wrong number, why didn't you say so? Why did you have to make something up?"

"Didn't make anything up," George mumbled. "That's what he told me."

She put on her sheared beaver, which doubled as evening wrap, without waiting for him to help her. They rode down in the elevator without speaking. In front of the apartment house she waited for George to bring the car from the garage in the basement. That was one nice thing about living in Forest Hills; there was place to keep a car.

They drove off toward the bridge, resentment in the set of George's shoulders. Exactly like a child, she thought without tenderness. After a few minutes, she reached forward and turned on the radio. Dance music terminated in an announcer's mention of the fact that the barometer was rising and it would be fair and slightly cooler that night but warm and sunny the next day.

"Going to rain tomorrow," George muttered.

"Nonsense," she said.

It was not quite eight when they got to West Forty-fifth Street. She waited outside a little bar they liked while George took the car to a parking lot; she didn't like to sit in a bar alone. When he came back they each had a couple of Martinis and by then it was eight-twenty and

time to go to the theater. The Cottons were already waiting for them in the lobby, and all four went on in together.

"Don't mind George," Elinor said in a loud whisper to Mrs. Cotton, as the men checked their coats, "he's sulking again. He got the wrong number when he was trying to find out the weather from the telephone company and, rather than admit it, he made up a weather report."

Both ladies tittered and Mr. Cotton chuckled, "Technological age still got you, eh, George?"

"It's going to storm," George said stubbornly. The other three laughed.

During the last act of the play they heard the unmistakable sound of thunder outside. When they got out of the theater rain was pouring in torrents. Elinor looked at her husband, compressed her lips tightly, and said nothing. After all, he couldn't have produced the storm himself, no matter how much she'd have liked to blame him for it.

"We might stay under the marquee until the rain stops," Mrs. Cotton suggested, "because we won't possibly be able to get a cab in this weather."

"The rain won't stop," George said.

"Go get the car, George," Elinor told him. "We'll drop Herb and Lou off first."

The Cottons chorused grateful acknowledgment. "But George'll

get wet," Mrs. Cotton murmured perfunctorily.

"He doesn't mind. Do you, dear?"

George made a growling sound and plunged out into the storm.

As soon as he had gone, Mrs. Cotton asked, "But how did he know it was going to rain?"

"It was a lucky guess," Elinor said. "Don't encourage him."

But when George had returned with the car, and the Cottons had been packed into the back seat, Mrs. Cotton repeated her question. "How did you know, George?"

"I keep telling you. I called the telephone company and that's what the guy told me."

"They don't have men answering the phone," his wife said, moving away from him so that the wet wool of his coat wouldn't mat her fur. "Only girls."

"I don't care," George replied. "A man answered the phone. I asked him what the weather was going to be—"

"But you don't ask," both ladies said in unison. "They just play a record when you dial that number," Mrs. Cotton explained. "Nobody can hear you . . ."

"This guy did. He said it was very kind of me to ask and he had scheduled a storm—a rainstorm."

The other three shifted in their seats. Mrs. Cotton leaned over toward George so that the odor of *Arpege* filled the front seat. "There's liquor on my breath," he said, "but I'm not drunk. Elinor

had just as much as I, and she's sober as a—a judge." He laughed as if he had said something funny.

"Well, I don't know," Mr. Cotton offered. "It takes some people differently than others. I don't mean to say you haven't got a strong head, but if you happen to have what they call an alcohol idiosyncrasy—"

"Did you dial WE 6-1212?" Mrs. Cotton asked George in the sharp tone usually reserved for her own husband.

He looked a little disturbed. "No, it wasn't quite like that—slightly different somehow. Like WE 6-2121 or maybe . . . anyhow different. I suppose that could explain it."

Mrs. Cotton sat back satisfied. "Of course that explains it. You got the wrong number and some practical joker lived there. That's all."

"Of course," Elinor echoed. "That must be it."

"But it *is* raining," Mr. Cotton pointed out.

"Just a coincidence," his wife said.

The car drew up before the Cot-

tons' apartment house on West Seventy-third. "Why don't you stay with us tonight?" Mrs. Cotton asked. "It's risky driving back to the Island in this weather."

"No, thanks," George answered, before Elinor had a chance to say anything. "We might as well get back tonight."

"We could have gone in for a little while," his wife rebuked him as they drove through the park. "At least until the rain stopped."

"The rain won't stop."

She laughed, a little too shrilly. "Don't be silly, George. It has to stop sometime."

"Does it?" He looked at her, and she didn't like his expression. "Well, I suppose it will. After forty days and forty nights. That's how long he told me it was going to last. But it won't make any difference to any of us then."

They turned on Fifty-ninth Street and swung east. George would see a psychoanalyst the next day, Elinor decided, no matter what.

They drove across the bridge. She knew it was just her imagination, but the river seemed appreciably higher.

