



Fantasy and Science Fiction

OCTOBER *Including Venture Science Fiction*

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Cover by Chesley Bonestell

*Cover by Chesley Bonestell
(Unloading empty fuel tanks on the moon)*

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Everybody, of course, has either read or heard about the smash bestseller and Pulitzer Prize winner, ADVISE AND CONSENT; we venture to guess, however, that a considerable number of readers who know of the book do not readily remember the name of its author. It is a curious but established fact that titles and authors do not remain reliably associated in the mind of the public—a fact recognized by Ellery Queen some 30 years ago when that collaborative writing team decided to adopt as their pseudonym the name of the featured character in their books. Of course, the more successful books a writer produces, the better his name is remembered, and ADVISE AND CONSENT is only the first book in a planned tetralogy, the other three of which will be titled A SHADE OF DIFFERENCE, CAPABLE OF HONOR, and PRESERVE AND PROTECT. It is quite possible that by the time the last one is published, you will go to your bookstore to ask for the new Allen Drury, the title of which has somehow slipped your mind. . . . Forget that for now, however, and entertain yourself with Mr. Drury's newest work—a classically simple little tale of a drowsy afternoon in spring, and the terror that comes with a sudden awareness of the unknown. . . .

SOMETHING

by Allen Drury

SMALL AND PROVINCIAL, THE college topped the gentle rise in the center of the plain; small and provincial, the museum stood just east of it amid the level fields. Through the open windows the afternoon sun, streaming across a

thousand miles of Middle West, came to rest in a warm pool of light at the foot of the Egyptian Room door. Outside, the trees, planted around the building in a self-conscious row by some long-forgotten founder, stirred gently

in the fresh yet drowsy air of early spring. The season, not yet productive of flies, permitted the heavily ornamented front doors to stand open on a view which passed across the main college buildings to the town, beyond it to fields already sown with grain, and so presently to an endless immensity of far distances lost at last in the cloudless depths of the sky.

Standing outside on the steps for a second before going back in, he felt completely at peace. Everything—his position as curator, the chance to study, the opportunity to live with just the right degree of responsibility in the academic atmosphere he loved—conspired to give him a steady satisfaction, sharpened by the afternoon's perfection into something approaching happiness. Even the neglect which was his only reward for the careful care he gave the museum's small but comprehensive collection had ceased to bother him. They cared little for him, the students whose cars he could see in the distance passing toward the town, and even the faculty rarely entered his domain; but today that seemed unimportant, far away, in another world from this warm and sleepy hour.

As he stood there, his mind lazily relaxed, a little breeze rose suddenly in the fields, sliding like a snake through the shoots of

grain. It leaped and twisted toward him, turning and writhing as though moved by a life of its own. A pleasurable anticipation banished the thought that the sparse hairs, so carefully combed, would be disarranged. What if they were! It was spring, and wind was good in the spring, and what if hairs were disarranged! He hoped they would be.

He noticed that the breeze had grown stronger, darting from side to side through the grass. It was about a hundred yards away, now. From somewhere in the fields it had picked up a weatherbeaten scrap of paper, was tossing it furiously back and forth like a puppy with a bone. Just before the wind reached him, the paper fell to the ground; then the current of air, rushing swiftly up the steps, struck him full in the face. He gasped, not only at its force, which he had underestimated, but at its nature, which he had not foreseen. It was hot—unusually hot and dry; so arid and lifeless that it quite took his breath away for a second. It wasn't a spring wind at all; rather the wind of summer, and summer somewhere far away in a hot land. It caused his throat to constrict painfully; then it was gone.

He looked around stupidly, as though he expected to see something behind him; but there was nothing. Only the open doors, the main room of the museum with

its neat row of cases, the grand stairway going up to the right, and the sun falling across the floor to the Egyptian Room. He shook his head, as if dazed, and laughed. What a silly thought! For a moment, when the breeze had dropped the paper so abruptly, he had had the curious impression that its sudden loss of interest had been caused by a more than normal whimsy. He had had the odd idea that it had dropped the paper *because it was bored*. And when it had finally reached the steps, it had seemed to pass, not around, but through him. He laughed again, ruefully; he was getting old! Old and doddering and—and crazy in the head, as they said.

He turned back to the peaceful panorama which stretched to the horizon. Spring! Spring, and he was not so old, either! As if to prove it, he ran lightly down the steps to where the paper lay on the grass. He couldn't leave rubbish lying around for the cats to play with. There were two or three, living in forgotten corners of the masonry, existing on mice and insects and scraps of food he sometimes remembered to bring them; one was a little gray kitten, of which he was quite fond. Realizing what a holiday they would have with it if they found it, he picked the paper up, folded it neatly, and trotted back up the steps.

At the top he turned for a last look at the gentle peace of the afternoon. Then he started in. In the doorway he paused. For some reason he could not explain, he wanted to close the doors after him. He attempted to ignore the feeling; he could not, the compulsion was too strong. After a moment, not knowing quite why, he pulled the doors part-way together; a shame-faced gesture, and one coming, though he did not know it, too late.

He noticed the confusion on his desk as soon as he started towards it. The papers he had left neatly piled on each side of the blotter had been pushed askew; one was half-way across the floor to the Egyptian Room. If the breeze had done that, it must have taken almost a right-angle turn once it got inside the door, for the desk stood along the wall to the right, opposite the foot of the stairs. Or had it been one of the cats, slipping in when his back was turned? He remembered running down the steps, leaving the door unguarded. After a moment he decided that must be it; and a tolerant amusement caused him to smile. Charming animals, but pesky, sometimes; and apt to be mischievous. It was not until he reached the desk that his complacency vanished.

Was it only a quirk of the mind, or did he actually see a pattern in the confusion there?

He could almost swear to it; a sort of deliberate disarray, as though someone had picked the papers up, held them high above the desk, and then let them fall. And on the desk itself, the papers still remaining had a curiously abandoned look, as though someone had been engaged in disturbing them and then had stopped suddenly. And again that odd impression of boredom shot through his mind, bringing with it this time a faint uneasiness, such as one might feel in the presence of something just a little abnormal, and strange.

Still, he thought, as he picked up the papers and rearranged them in their former order, it could have been the cats; in fact, it must have been the cats. The little gray kitten in particular was fond of climbing on the desk; never, to be sure, to wreak quite such havoc as it had this time, but always to disturb whatever it came across. He realized that it must be somewhere in the building now, and, thinking of the serious damage it could do to the fragile exhibits on the second floor, he started hastily up the marble staircase. On the landing he paused abruptly. Before he could stop himself, he had whirled around like a toy on a revolving platform and called out into the empty room below.

"What's that?" he said. The words flung themselves back to

him sibilantly from the echoing walls. Nothing stirred in the sunlight on the floor, no sounds other than those of the day outside came to him. After a moment he laughed shortly. How stupid! He knew he was alone in the building; he must have imagined that sudden sensation of another presence. He told himself firmly not to be a fool. If he started seeing things in broad daylight, what would it be like when—he gasped, and a little chill of fear ran suddenly down his back.

"Well, for heaven's sakes," he said to the listening statues, the attentive cases, "look at that desk!"

He was not quite sure how he got back down the stairs and across the floor to it, for when he did his relief blotted out the details of one of the hardest things he had ever done. "I feel like dancing a jig," he thought; and the idea amused him so much that he began to laugh. What would people say if they came in and caught him capering! And for such an insignificant reason, too. Simply because a kitten had got its paw wet with ink and drawn a long smear on his blotter—simply because a kitten *was* a kitten, beyond all doubt—he wanted to dance a jig! He continued to chuckle at himself while he picked up the papers for the second time and put them away in the desk. If he wasn't the one,

letting a breeze and a kitten give him the fidgets! What wouldn't it be next!

He had just finished putting the last paper away in the drawer when the noise began. At first it was very faint and very far away, and he hardly noticed it. Then it grew stronger and he began to hear it. Intrigued by its quality, he tried idly to find an explanation. It wasn't a steady sound, but quick, nervous, separated. It might be someone having trouble with his car; but not quite. It might be water spattering onto pavement from a hose; but not quite. For a long time it seemed to originate in the fields. Not until he decided that it sounded exactly like heavy cloth being torn did he realize that it was coming from somewhere inside the building.

His first impulse was one of disbelief, followed by annoyance. It wasn't enough to see things; one had to hear them too. He told himself again not to be a fool. There was probably some very simple explanation. But when none occurred to him, he began to grow afraid. It was such a pointless noise; there was so little excuse for it. It seemed to exist outside time and space, as remote from humdrum reason as the paper in the breeze or the disarrangement on his desk. In fact, if one were romantic enough, one might almost see a

connection between them, a certain perverse pattern linking them together. Not that he did, of course; but it was all he could do to make himself leave the desk and begin searching the building. Only a sense of duty and the realization that he would be foolish to give in to his feeling made him do so.

When he had gone through all the rooms, upstairs and down, and found each as he knew it would be, placid and empty and still, he returned breathlessly to the head of the stairs. The noise was beginning to grow a little louder, its harsh rasp more frequent. He shook his head helplessly. It couldn't be explained; and it couldn't be found; and he didn't really know what to do about it. He might ignore it; but it was scarcely the sort of thing one could ignore. It was too strange, too—frightening.

His hands felt cold; the combination of the beautiful day and that pointless sound produced by its very incongruity a mood closely approaching terror. He knew that running back to the head of the stairs so fast that he had almost missed the landing and fallen hadn't helped matters any; but he had not been able to prevent that instinctive flight, even when his mind told him it was a flight from nothing. The sunlight had seemed suddenly garish, the peace of the afternoon a mock-

ery; he had had again that sharp impression of—something. It had given wings to his feet; before he knew it, he had hastened back to the echoing expanse of the main room.

Resting for a moment while he caught his breath, he began to notice a new rhythm in the noise. It was slower; no quieter, but much slower. Presently it stopped for several seconds and then began again. A thrill of recognition caused him to catch his breath. It's getting bored again, he thought; *what will it do now?* He cleared his throat abruptly and counted firmly to ten. When he had finished he forced himself to laugh.

"How absurd!" he said aloud. "I'm talking just as though there really were something."

The familiar sound of his own voice restored his composure and his common sense. What a dithering old ninny he was! Making a ghost out of whole cloth and then letting it scare him to death! He must have one foot in the grave, indeed; the one he thought with, evidently.

He marched firmly down the stairs and across to his desk, putting the noise aside brusquely. Let it tear up the whole roll of burlap if he wanted to, whatever it was. He had other things to do. He couldn't be bothered with noises, no matter how unique.

Noticing the ink-smeared blot-

ter when he reached the desk, he remembered that the kitten was still somewhere in the building.

"Kitty!" he called. "Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!" Then he gave an amused sigh of relief. "Why, of course," he said. "It's sharpening its claws somewhere."

After that it was easy to search the building again. It was one thing to look for a Noise, a disembodied Something; it was another to look for a kitten. Outside the door of the Egyptian Room he hesitated momentarily in the sun. In his mind's eye he could almost see the little animal, busily engaged in—or could he? Supposing—supposing that when he opened the door he saw— A sudden furious scratching decided him. The little devil must be sharpening its claws on one of the mummy-cases that stood along the walls. He strode forward impatiently, into the absolute silence of the empty room.

"Kitty?" he said tentatively. His only answer was a sudden bickering of the birds in the trees outside. He called again.

"Here, kitty?" The silence seemed to become, if anything, more profound.

"Come out here, you little scamp!" he said; in spite of himself he was unable to keep a pleading note out of his voice. "Come out from under there!"

"Kitty!" he said firmly; and regretted it at once, for the noise

answered him. As surely as though it had spoken, it answered; a surprised, somewhat uncertain, somewhat puzzled answer.

"What?" its rasp seemed to be saying.

"Kitty!" he cried, his voice growing thin.

"What? What?" said the noise again.

At this sound, which seemed to represent the impersonal curiosity of something so inhuman, or so long dead, that it had lost all contact with the world of men, his control snapped completely.

"What are you?" he cried. "What do you want, you frightful thing?"

At once the room filled with sound, harsh, rasping, furious, echoing back and forth between the walls until it seemed to come from everywhere. He felt as though a weight were pressing on his head; a storm of sound seemed to be crushing the breath from his body.

With an inarticulate cry he turned and ran from the room. Pursued by phantoms which seemed to dance along the sunlight, caught in the grip of fear, he ran frantically across the floor and without reason up the stairs.

No, his mind said senselessly; no. *Go back.* Unable to control his terror, he turned like a desperate animal. In his haste, blinded by the sunlight which now fell full across the landing, his foot missed the step and he hurtled forward, to land halfway down the stairs. Just before his skull struck the stone a streak of gray shot across his vision. In a last flash of sanity he had time to think *Of course, of course*, before his mind reeled down forever into darkness.

The kitten trotted out into the center of the room, stretched and yawned. It paid no attention to the ponderous descent of his body as it slid slowly, jerkily, step by step to the floor.

Purring contentedly, the kitten cleaned itself. Finished, it stretched once more and yawned again. Suddenly it stopped and listened intently. Its eyes widened, and along its back the hairs began to rise.

From somewhere in the echoing room a little noise began. It wasn't a steady sound, but quick, nervous, separated. It sounded exactly like heavy cloth being torn, and it grew rapidly louder and nearer as the kitten crouched rigid with terror in the sun.

