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Pin the Medals On Poe

It took a writer three centuries dead to teach the Twenty-First Century's police the importance of the obvious!



By
F. Anton Reeds

CENTRAL Police Headquarters was a scene of wildest confusion and the most confused of anyone there was Police Chief Xenophon Marks. His stubby gray military moustache bristled like the spikes of a Saturnian hedgehog and his usually friendly face was purple with the humility of complete frustration.

"I tell you, it's no use," he screeched into the visaphone connecting with the

office of the chief of WBI, the World Bureau of Investigation in Washington. "We've turned this city upside down. We've quizzed every petty yegg that ever so much as saw a picture of Pher Nor."

There was a moment of silence, broken by the brittle command of the WBI chief.

"They've got to be there. Look again."

"All right," Marks bellowed, his mustaches dancing. "We'll look again. But you know this burg as well as I do. This is no space port. A Martian racket czar and two Venusian grox miners would be about as inconspicuous as an albino dinosaur at a Rotarian banquet."

Chief Marks snapped off the phone and turned to the roomful of bluecoats.

"Come on, boys," he muttered.

His eye fell upon the well-built figure of Inspector Eddie Dugan, whose long legs draped negligently across the desk top while he tilted back, book in hand. The ever faithful Quinby Cobb, his rotund body bulging beneath a closely buttoned patrolman's uniform, sat as usual in a chair near Dugan, his idol, sleeping noisily.

Marks snorted.

"READING again, eh, Dugan? With the whole solar system going to pot all around you there you sit with your nose in one of those confounded story books of the ancients. What has that got to do with police work, I'm asking you?"

Inspector Dugan's clear gray eyes peered at his chief over the book top.

"This a book of stories by a fellow named Edgar Allan Poe."

"Was this Poe a policeman?"

Inspector Dugan grinned.

"Not exactly. But the old histories say he was the man who wrote the first detective story."

Chief Xenephone Marks grunted in disgust.

"Precious lot of good his detecting would do today. Think maybe he can help you catch Pher Nor?"

"Maybe," Inspector Dugan agreed and watched Chief Marks stomp out of the room, his bluecoat army at his heels.

The sudden silence awakened Quinby Cobb. He stared at the Inspector with bug-eyed surprise.

"Ain't'cha gonna look for Pher Nor?"

Dugan kicked his feet down from the desk and slipped the cheap little reprint volume into his pocket.

"You heard the chief say himself that it was no use."

He reached out and flipped on a telex. The face of a harassed newscaster leaped to life on the screen.

"—threw solar police into confusion," he was saying. "Despite assurances of the WBI and of Martian and Venusian police authorities that the trail of the arch public enemy, Pher Nor, and the two Venusian prisoners he is holding as hostages led to Midland City, the trail reached a blind alley tonight when Chief Xenephone Marks reported that no trace of the desperado and his victims could be found.

"The chase began three months ago when Pher Nor made a successful break from the prison mines at Navvar. Venus; walking unmolested through the gates marching two other prisoners before him at the point of a deadly pneumatic handgun. The two Venusians, political prisoners, are noblemen of the Dor dynasty whose lives are sacred."

An all-girl orchestra followed the newscast. Dugan reached for his pipe, lit it, and concentrated for several minutes on the pretty blonde violinist in the front row. Then he shut off the telex and turned to Quinby Cobb.

"WHAT does Midland City offer in the way of amusements this week?" he asked unexpectedly.

The plump policeman blinked incredulously.

"There's a televox star making a personal appearance at the Grand. And a burlesque at the Seven-Worlds with a red girl from Mars doing some pretty hot native dances."

"Too nice a night to spend in a theater," Eddie Dugan sighed. "Any circuses in town?"

"No circus, chief," Cobb drawled. "But there's a carnival."

Eddie Dugan looked at his roly-poly assistant with renewed interest.

"You have your own peculiar talents, Quinby," he said with a grin. "Tell me about it."

"It's a big one. The Solar Amusement Company. At the old circus grounds on Thirtieth, a block east of the Inter-City rocket station."

Inspector Dugan picked up his hat, jammed it on his head, and rose.

"Let's go."

Patrolman Quinby Cobb sighed heavily and lumbered to his feet.

"Where?" he asked.

The rangy inspector, grinning broadly, pulled a five dollar bill from a pocket and waved it before the startled eyes of his companion.

"To the Solar Amusement Company. You and I are going to take in the sights, Quinby. Even policemen need relaxation once in a while."

In the elevator on the way out of the building Quinby Cobb had a twinge of conscience.

"Gee, chief," he muttered, "We ought to be looking for Pher Nor."

"You never can tell," Dugan answered. "Maybe we'll run into him."

Patrolman Quinby Cobb, whose failure to observe small and seemingly unimportant details had often kept him from promotion in the past, did not notice the grim lines at the corners of the inspector's mouth.

A block from headquarters they took a gyro-taxi and within a few minutes the gaily lighted midway of the Solar Amusement Company was glistening beneath them.

Once inside the garish gates the lanky inspector had to accommodate his pace to that of the chubby policeman, who halted every few steps to gaze at the tall neon pictures depicting some new wonder from the far-flung corners of the solar system. As they passed the rows of games of chance the strident calls of the concessionaires were temporarily silenced. Before the gaudy front of the "Trip to Mars" show they both halted. Eddie Dugan dug into his pocket, purchased two tickets and strode through the short tunnel to the 'rocket ship', the rotund little bluecoat trotting at his heels.

THE lights in the 'ship' darkened, a swooshing roar rocked the little band of amusement seekers and they settled back to enjoy vicariously the thrills of space travel that they would never know in their humdrum, earthbound lives.

With a sigh that was not a sigh of content Inspector Dugan gazed through the porthole at the star illumined blackness that was by the magic of cunningly-concealed light transformed from strips of painted carnival scenery to the black reaches of outer space.

"I know what he's thinking, the poor young fellow," Quinby Cobb told himself bitterly. "He's thinking about the space patrol and how he'd give his good right eye to wear the red rockets of the Interplanetary on his sleeve. Fat chance he's got, stuck out here on the Midland City police force. It's a shame, too, and him studying every night and getting practically no fun at all out of life."

It made Quinby Cobb feel a deep inward sadness. Perhaps that was why he failed to notice the remarkable change in the young inspector as the 'trip' ended

as abruptly as it began and they were once more back under the lights of the midway.

For a deep content had settled upon Inspector Dugan and a grim smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"Freaks," he told Cobb. "That's it. Let's look at some freaks."

This time it was the inspector who followed the fat policeman as he led the way to the midway's biggest show.

"*A Galaxy of Gargantuan Wonders from the Realms of Space*," screamed the lighted banners. Dugan stared at the poetry, then abruptly entered.

The celophite tent was long and crowded, with double rows of pits and platforms down two long aisles. Just inside the door a score of the strange little *blux*, furry rock-eels from Phoebos, slithered about a moss strewn cage and a giant banner with a pointing arrow proclaimed that each and every twenty minutes the beautiful six-armed Princess Selalla would entertain at the rear of the tent with the sensational Dance of the Venusian Virgins.

Quinby Cobb was all for getting to the back of the tent at once.

"We might as well be on the front row, chief," he explained plaintively, but the tall inspector restrained him.

"We've got plenty of time," he said in a voice that brooked no argument and stood gazing speculatively at the rows of strange other-world creatures on the gaudy platforms.

Quinby Cobb eyed the inspector suspiciously.

"You looking for anything special?" he asked.

"Sort of," Inspector Dugan drawled without turning his head.

As they worked their way slowly through the crowd the metallic voice of the speakers throughout the tent announced that the Princess Selalla was preparing to entertain. There was a scurry for the back of the tent and Eddie Dugan

and Cobb found themselves alone in the deserted aisle.

Quinby Cobb was preparing to follow the others when the steel hand of the inspector clutched his elbow.

"Take a look at that," Dugan gritted into Cobb's ear and nodded toward a platform at the inside of the aisle. The two figures on the platform might have been twins. Their skin was of a peculiar ivory pallor and their great high foreheads rose above thin, prominent noses—the typical features of the honored Ancient ones of Venus.

"*They Baffle Science*," the banner above them announced. "*The Living Dead—Found in an Ancient Tomb of Venus, Their Bodies Have Been Embalmed For 3,000 Years but They Are Still Alive*."

Dugan strode toward the platform.

The two figures seated on the platform were almost immobile, only the occasional twitching of a finger or a facial muscle proclaiming them alive.

"Doped!" Dugan grunted. "I should have known they would be."

He pointed to their long, thin hands.

"See those welts? And those blue stains? That's from three years in the prison mines. Only Venusian grox leaves that peculiar stain!"

The rotund Cobb gulped audibly. His eyes bugged and his jaw sagged limply.

"You don't mean—," he spluttered.

"That's exactly what I mean," Dugan said, his voice low. "Those are Pher Nor's hostages."

From an inside pocket of his tunic Dugan drew out a small kit and extracted a hypodermic needle.

"This should bring them out of it long enough to spill some highly interesting information," he told Cobb. Reaching up, he took the hand of one of the Venusians and felt the wrist with skilled fingers. Then the needle plunged into the ivory-white skin.

SUDDENLY there was a soft, almost inaudible sighing in the air about them and a tiny black hole appeared suddenly in the forehead of the creature on the platform. Dugan felt the Venusian relax in death. The sighing was there in the air again and a similar black hole burned into the forehead of the other figure on the platform.

Inspector Dugan jerked to one side and wheeled about in the empty aisle. On the platform across from him a banner said simply: "*Kee-Kee, One of the Strange Woolly-Headed Warriors from the Metallic Mountain Crags of Mercury.*" There had been just such a creature there a moment before, with coarse ropey hair like strands of woven wool. Now the platform was empty!

"We'll have to work fast," Dugan grunted and hurried across the aisle.

Behind the platform he tore aside a strip of celophite sidewall and ducked out into the darkness. He found himself in a narrow alleyway between tents. Ahead of him he thought he saw a dark shape running. Jerking free a pneumatic hand-gun, he raced in pursuit. Behind him as he ran he heard the cumbrous clop-clop of Patrolman Cobb's oversize shoes.

The running form ahead twisted and turned down a labyrinth of dark passages behind the maze of tents, but youth began to tell and Inspector Dugan felt himself closing the distance to the fleeing man he knew was Pher Nor, the Martian outlaw. He could hear the man's labored breathing now. Suddenly the figure ahead was gone. When Dugan rounded a corner Pher Nor stood not ten feet away.

He was between two tents with his back to the open, crowded midway. The rope wig was awry and the sweated grease-paint of his disguise streaked his purple face. In his hand was the pneumatic gun with which, minutes before, he had murdered his prisoners.

Inspector Dugan's own gun was useless. To fire toward the opening in which Pher Nor stood would endanger the lives of those in the midway crowd only a foot or two behind the Martian.

As he lunged forward, Eddie Dugan felt a searing, nauseating pain in his right shoulder. He'd have to get that wound cauterized in a matter of minutes, he knew. The impact buckled his knees and sent him reeling against a guy-rope as Pher Nor charged past him toward the darkness from which they had come.

But in the moment that the Martian seemed destined to escape the bulky figure of Quinby Cobb lumbered out of the blackness and the two collided with a force that sent them both to the ground. Pher Nor was on his feet at once. But Dugan had pulled himself upright. He sprang forward, grappling with his one good arm for the Martian's knees.

THE pain of something wet and hot stinging the wound in his shoulder roused him. The drumming sound in his head resolved itself into a babel of excited voices. The green walls swayed and took shape and he saw that he was back in the office at Central Police Headquarters. A doctor was taping a last piece of bandage over his shoulder and Quinby Cobb stood over him, a foolish grin on his round face.

Two televisors, bearing the initials S. B. S. (Solar Broadcasting System) and I. B. C. (Inter-world Broadcasting Corporation) stood where the televox had been a few hours before.

Lanky, gray-haired James Winthrop, chief of W. B. I., stood smiling into the visa-plate and beside him was Chief Xenophon Marks, beaming like a proud and happy father.

"I know you who are watching the scene here from your homes in three worlds," the W. B. I. chief told his unseen audience, "will want to hear from

Inspector Eddie Dugan, the man who captured Pher Nor, aided by Patrolman Cobb, who has just spoken. I know, too, that you will forgive me if I do not keep him long, for he is tired and injured and he needs rest. I hope that tonight he may return with me by rocket to Washington as my special guest."

The W. B. I. chief turned to Dugan. Two policemen helped the young inspector to his feet before the visa-plate.

"We all want to know what led you to Pher Nor," the world police head told Dugan. "It is a pleasure to tell you that your exploit tonight has earned for you rewards totaling more than twenty thousand dollars, earth exchange; the offer of a commission as Ensign in the Interplanetary Patrol and medals for valor from the W. B. I. and from the governments of Mars and Venus."

Inspector Eddie Dugan felt Quinby Cobb's big hand thumping his good left shoulder.

"I sure will take that Ensign's commission," he told the police head with a grin. "And I reckon me and Quinby here can use that reward money. But I guess you'd better take the medals down

to the bureau of public archives and pin 'em on the bust of Edgar Allan Poe."

"Poe?"

The face of the W. B. I. chief registered surprise.

"Sure, Poe." Eddie Dugan's grin broadened. "He wrote a story once called *The Purloined Letter*. About a fellow who wanted to hide a letter. He knew that folks who wanted that letter would practically take the joint apart. So where do you suppose he hid it? In a letter rack in plain sight on the wall. That gave me an idea. A Martian and two Venusians slinking around this town would be pretty easy to spot. I figured there was only one place in Midland City that you could see three people from other worlds and not get suspicious—at a circus or a carnival. In order to hide, Pher Nor had to get himself in plain sight in front of as many people as possible. So I guess Poe should get the credit for his capture after all."

Quinby Cobb let out a bull-throated bellow that was heard with infinite glee in the living rooms of three worlds.

"Gee, Chief," he bleated, "we never did get to see that Princess Selalla."

THE END