

A Short Story

\$1000 A PLATE

JACK MCKENTY

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TINY WINDOWS

Cover: Illustration created by MidJourney software (an AI generator) using the prompt “astromers on mars, an observatory in a terraformed future city, earth in the distance, the magnificence of the universe beyond, explosions of fireworks being shot off from the city competing with views of the heavens, muted tones for the planet with vibrant colors for everything else

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Sunset on Mars is a pale, washed out, watery sort of procedure that is hardly worth looking at. The shadows of the cactus lengthen, the sun goes down without the slightest hint of color or display and everything is dark. About once a year there is one cloud that turns pink briefly. But even the travel books devote more space describing the new sign adorning the Canal Casino than they do on the sunset.

The night sky is something else again. Each new crop of tourists goes to bed at sunrise the day after arrival with stiff necks from looking up all night. The craters of the moons are visible to the naked eye, and even a cheap pair of opera glasses can pick out the buildings of the Deimos Space Station.

A typical comment from a sightseer is, "Just think, Fred, we were way up there only twelve hours ago."

At fairly frequent intervals, the moons eclipse. The local Chamber of Commerce joins with the gambling casinos to use these occasions as excuses for a celebration. The "Marsy Gras" includes floats, costumes, liquor, women, gambling—and finishes off with a display of fireworks and a stiff note of protest from the nearby Mars Observatory.



The day after a particularly noisy, glaring fireworks display, the top brass at the Observatory called an emergency meeting. The topic was not a new one, but fresh evidence, in the form of several still-wet photographic plates, showing out-of-focus skyrocket trails and a galaxy of first-magnitude aerial cracker explosions was presented.

"I maintain they fire them in our direction on purpose," one scientist declared.

This was considered to be correct because the other directions around town were oil refineries and the homes of the casino owners.

"Why don't we just move the Observatory way out in the desert?" a technician demanded. "It wouldn't be much of a job."

"It would be a tremendous job," said Dr. Morton, the physicist. "If not for the glare of city lights on Earth, we wouldn't have had to move our telescopes to the Moon. If not for the gravel falling out of the sky on the Moon, making it necessary to resurface the reflectors every week, we wouldn't have had to move to Mars. Viewing conditions here are just about perfect—except for the immense cost of transporting the equipment, building materials, workmen, and paying us triple time for working so far from home. Why, did you ever figure the cost of a single photographic plate? What with salaries, freight to and from Earth, maintenance and all the rest, it's enormous!"

"Then why don't we cut down the cost of ruined exposures," asked the technician, "by moving the Observatory away from town?"

"Because," Dr. Morton explained, "we'd have to bring in crews to tear the place down, other crews to move it, still more crews to rebuild it. Not to mention unavoidable breakage and replacement, which involve more freight from Earth. At \$7.97 per pound dead-weight ... well, you figure it out."

"So we can't move and we can't afford ruined thousand-dollar plates," said the scientist who had considered himself a target for the fireworks. "Then what's the answer?"



The usual suggestion was proposed that a delegation approach the Town Council to follow up the letter of protest. A search through the past meetings' minutes showed that this had never accomplished anything up to date.

A recent arrival to the Observatory mentioned that their combined brain power should be enough to beat the games and thus force the casino owners—who were the real offenders—out of business. One of the scientists, who had already tried that very scheme on a small scale, reported his results. He proved with his tabulations that, in this instance, science, in the guise of the law of averages, was unfortunately against them.

Dr. Morton rose to his feet. The other men listened to his plan, at first with shocked horror, then with deep interest and finally in wild exultation. The meeting broke up with most of the members grinning from ear to ear. "It's lucky Dr. Morton is a physicist," said one of the directors. "No astronomer would ever have thought of that."



A few days later a modest little ad appeared in the weekly publication "What to do in Marsport." It did not try to compete with any of the casino ads (all of which featured pretty girls), but it had a unique heading.

FREE
For the First Time Ever
Your HOROSCOPE
SCIENTIFICALLY CAST
by the Staff of the
FAMOUS MARS OBSERVATORY
Learn your Luck, your Future!
Write or call Mars Observatory.
No charge. No obligation.

Since the horoscopes being offered were about the only things on Mars that didn't cost the tourists any money, the response was great. The recipient of a horoscope found a mimeographed folder which contained three pages describing the present positions of the planets, where to look for Earth in the sky, and what science hoped to learn the next time Mercury was in transit. The fourth page held the kicker. It said that while the tourist's luck would be better than average at most of the gambling houses, he would lose consistently if he played at Harvey's Club.

Within two days the only people playing at Harvey's were the skills. The following day, the visitors to the observatory included Harvey.

The gambler was welcomed with mingled respect for his money and contempt for his occupation. He was taken immediately to see Dr. Morton, who greeted him with a sly smile.

Harvey's conversation was brief and to the point. "How much?" he asked waving a horoscope under Dr. Morton's nose.

"Just a promise," said the scientist. Harvey said nothing but looked sullen. "You are on the Town Council," Morton continued. "Now, the next time the question of tourist entertainment is discussed, we want you to vote against a fireworks display." He then explained how important plates had been ruined by skyrocket trails.

Harvey listened with great interest, especially when Dr. Morton flatly stated that each casino, in turn, would get the same publicity in the horoscopes.

"The Council members are all for the tourists," Harvey commented, "and you guys are supposed to be nuts, like all scientists. But I'll do like you say." He reached into his pocket. "Here's fifty bucks. Use it for a full page ad this time and do the Desert Sands Casino in your next horoscope. And say—before I

go, can I look through the telescope? I never seemed to have the time before.”



At weekly intervals, Dr. Morton "did" the Desert Sands; Frankland's Paradise; the Martian Gardens; and the Two Moons Club. From each owner he extracted the same promise—to vote against the fireworks at the Council meetings.

The technique was settling down to a routine. Each victim came, made the promise, paid for the following week's ad, named the next casino, and was taken on a tour of the Observatory. Then disaster struck.

It took the form of an interplanetary telegram from Harvard Observatory, their parent organization. It read:

EARTH NEWSPAPERS CARRYING ACCOUNTS OF
HOROSCOPES PUBLISHED BY YOUR ORGANIZATION
VERY UNSCIENTIFIC MUST STOP AT ONCE FIND
OTHER SOLUTION

L K BELL DIRECTOR

Dr. Morton was eating alone in the staff dining room when he noticed a familiar face beside him. "Harvey," he said. "Guess you've come down to gloat over our misfortune."

"No, Professor," said Harvey. "You've got my promise to help you boys and I'll stick by you. It's a rotten shame, too. You just about made it. The rest of the club owners saw the writing on the wall and were going to cooperate with you when the telegram came. All of us got contacts in the telegraph office, so they heard about it soon as it arrived and stayed away."

Dr. Morton said, "Yes, I supposed they would. There's not much we can do now."

"There are thirteen members on the Council." Harvey continued, "and you've got five of us. If that telegram had only come one day later—no more fireworks. But I got an idea."

Dr. Morton pushed aside his empty coffee cup and stood up. "Let's get out in the fresh air."

The Town Council was adding insult to injury by staging one of the biggest fireworks displays ever. It consisted of practically all skyrockets. Dr. Morton expressed wonder at their supply; Harvey explained that they were made right on Mars. He went on to tell his idea.

"I was real interested in everything when you took me around the first time I was here," the gambler said. "The same goes for the other boys who saw the place. Most of us meant to come out here and look around sometime, but you people work nights and, us mostly working nights, too, we never got around to it. How about arranging an exclusive tour sometime just for the club operators and their help? Then when they see everything, you could offer to name a star after them or something. If I hadn't already promised, I'd be willing to promise, just to be able to point in the sky and say 'That's Harvey's Star.'"

Dr. Morton smiled gently. "That's a wonderful idea," he said, "but I don't think it would work. Any stars worth looking at with the naked eye already have names. The only ones we could name after people are so far away that, it would take an exposure of several hours, just to see them on a photographic plate. You wouldn't be able to point yours out at all. Besides, Harvard Observatory wouldn't stand for this idea either. It would make as much sense to them as you naming a poker chip after me."

He sighed. "But, in any case, we would like to have all the owners over some time. It might improve relations somewhat." The two of them watched a rocket wobble all over the sky before exploding.

"Let's go back inside," said the physicist. "Maybe we can arrange that tour for Sunday."



Sunday afternoon the visitors, presumably softened up by what one of the chemists thought were martinis, were seated in the lecture hall listening to Dr. Morton's concluding remarks.

"One of the technicians is working on a gadget with a photocell that closes the shutter on the film when a rocket goes up," Dr. Morton was saying. "It should cut down the exposure time a great deal. Right now, every night may be significant. If the plates from any one night are spoiled, we may not be able to duplicate them for a Martian year. Mankind is preparing the first trip to another star, and the work of Mars Observatory is necessary to insure the success of that trip. You gentlemen are rightly the leaders of Mars, and so it is up to you to decide whether or not that success will be possible." He sat down to a smattering of applause.

The visitors, except Harvey, then left.

"It didn't go over, Professor," said Harvey.

"I know," said Dr. Morton. "That washes out that plan." He turned to the gambler. "You're the only person I can trust with this," he said. "How would you like to help me make some fireworks?"



One week later the two men had everything ready. That night, as quietly as possible, they moved to a position behind a fence near the skyrocket launching racks. Dr. Morton was carrying a compass, a flashlight, and a small clinometer; Harvey was struggling with

two large skyrockets. He whispered, "What if we miss or they go off too soon, or something?"

"Nonsense, Harvey," said Dr. Morton. He busied himself with the flashlight and compass, and carefully aimed one of the rockets. "You forget I am a physicist." He then aimed the other rocket and checked elevation with the clinometer. "The fuels are standard, and I worked out the trajectories on the computer. Ready with your match? These are going to explode in the canal, and get everybody in the Canal Casino all wet." He peeked over the fence, to see how the regular display was doing. "Here comes their finale. Ready, set, light!"

Covered by the launching of the last of the official display, their two rockets arced up and away. One of them did explode in the canal, and most of the Casino's patrons did get wet. But the other wobbled off to the right, landed on the roof of Harvey's bachelor home and burned it to the ground.



Dr. Morton sat numbly in front of his typewriter, staring at a letter. He couldn't seem to find the right words for what he wished to say. He tried to derive inspiration from a glossy photograph lying on the table beside him. It had what looked like another skyrocket trail on it.

Before he could answer it, the door opened and Harvey walked in, accompanied by two men with muscles. "I haven't seen you since the accident, Professor," he said.

"I've been trying to write you a letter," said Dr. Morton, "to tell you how sorry I am about what happened. And I also have to thank you for getting that law against fireworks through the Council. I am extremely sorry it took your house burning down to convince them."

"I keep my promises," said Harvey. One of the men with muscles turned the radio on, loud.

"We're trying to get up a collection among the staff to help pay for your losses," said Dr. Morton, "but the director suggested a more permanent kind of remembrance." He picked up the photograph. "This will be one of the brightest objects in the sky, in a few months. It won't be back again for thousands of years, but it will be around for a good while. We've just discovered it, and it is our privilege to call it 'Harvey's Comet.'"

"That's nice," said Harvey. The first of the two men went around pulling down blinds; the other went into the bathroom and starting filling the tub.

"Well," said the physicist, looking tired and old, "I guess there's nothing more I can say."

"Oh, yes, there is, Professor," said Harvey, with a sudden grin on his face. He turned to his muscle men. "You two guys cut out the comedy and bring it in, now."

The two men followed his instructions.

"You see, Professor," the gambler continued, "I took a beating on the house, but the other club boys chipped in and made up all my losses. So, I don't need your money at all. Besides, I have two things to thank you for. First, I heard about the comet from one of your men, and it's the nicest thing anybody's ever done for me." One of his men came back with what looked like a round candy box. "Second, that fire was the best publicity stunt I could get. It made the papers back on Earth and all the new tourists are packing into the Harvey Club. Even the other operators are playing my tables. That's why I want you to have this."

He handed Dr. Morton the box. It read "Harvey's Club" in the center, and "Doctor Morton's Poker Chip" around the edge. Across the bottom, it said "Five Thousand."

"That's dollars in it, Professor," said Harvey. "Don't spend it all in one place."





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