

Christmas Eve at Harvey Wallbanger's: A Harry the Book Story

Written by Mike Resnick

So we are sitting around Joey Chicago's 3-Star Tavern, with the wind howling outside the front door and sounding just like Velvet Voice Vinnie singing off-key. I am nursing an Old Washensox, minding my own business, which of course is dependent on whether Aqueduct comes up muddy on Christmas Day. Gently Gently Dawkins has been studying the crossword puzzle in the newspaper for the past twenty minutes, trying to come up with a four-letter word for "stupid," when Benny Fifth Street suddenly remembers what night it is.

"Hey, Joey!" says Benny. "Did you ever patch that hole in your roof?"

"It ain't snowing on you, is it?" shoots back Joey Chicago from behind the bar.

"That's good," says Gently Gently, looking up from his puzzle. "I wouldn't want no reindeer falling on top of me."

"Right," agrees Benny. "Then it'd be 'Off, Dancer! Off Prancer! Off all you other horned nags!' instead of 'On, Dancer! and so forth.'"

"Are you sure there was a Prancer?" asks Gently Gently.

"Absolutely," says Benny. "There's got to be, if it's going to rhyme with Dancer."

"That is all very well and good," says Gently Gently, "but I don't remember nothing rhyming with Cupid or Rocket."

"There ain't no Rocket," says Benny.

"Sure there is," says Gently Gently. "There's Dancer, Prancer, Donner, Vixen, Cupid, Cupcake, Dandy and Rocket."

"I got a double sawbuck that says some of them are not in the sleigh-pulling business, and that I can name more of Santa's reindeer than you can," says Benny.

Gently Gently slaps twenty dollars on the bar. "Okay, wise guy," he says. "You're faded."

Benny frowns, trying to remember his childhood, when he probably knew the names of the reindeer as well as I know the morning line at Santa Anita. Finally he clears his throat and says: "Dancer, Prancer, Donner, Vixen, Buster, Blitzen, Gemini and Comet."

"I don't remember no Blitzen," says Gently Gently.

"Of course not," says Benny. "That's why you are losing the bet."

Gently Gently turns to me. "Boss, who's right?"

"Neither of you," I tell him.

"Put in your twenty bucks and take your best shot," says Benny, who is getting more than a little warm under the collar.

"I do not make bets," I said. "That is for suckers. I book bets, which in case it has slipped your mind is how I pay your salaries. But I will name the reindeer anyway: Groucho, Harpo, Chico, Gummo, Zeppo,

Curly, Moe and Larry."

"You're all wrong," says Joey Chicago. "You're forgetting Rudolph—though I cannot imagine his nose gets much redder than Gently Gently's after he has downed a couple of Old Peculiars and a chaser." He grabs the forty bucks and sticks it in his pocket. "Anyway, I guess that makes me the winner."

Benny holds out an empty glass. "If you're going to keep the money, I should at least get a free refill."

"Check the walls," says Joey. "Do you see any signs posted to the effect that this is a charitable institution?"

"Where is your Christmas spirit?" demands Benny.

"I left it in my other suit," says Joey.

Just then, before they can come to blows, or more likely curses, Dead End Dugan walks through the door. I don't mean through the doorway; I mean through the door. We have to make allowances for Dugan, who is a little more powerful and a lot less noticing since he became a zombie.

"I been looking all over for you, Harry," he says.

"That is probably why you haven't found me until now," I reply.

"Bet-A-Million McNabb owes you a lot of money, doesn't he?" says Dugan, and I notice that Benny and Joey have backed away, because when you've been dead and occasionally buried for the past five years you just naturally are not about to put any perfume companies out of business, or even any cologne companies for that matter. Gently Gently, who is rarely operating on more than two or three of the eight cylinders God gave him, keeps sniffing his drink, trying to figure out where the smell is coming from.

"Yes," I say. "He drops ten large betting on Horrendous Howard to knock Kid Testosterone out by the fifth round." I shake my head sadly. "Horrendous Howard might pull it off, too, if he doesn't trip and fall on his head going back to his corner after the first round. Last I hear, he still thinks he is King Arthur and he will not eat off any table that has corners on it."

"This is all no doubt very interesting," said Dugan, who as far as I can tell has not recently been interested in much besides visiting Madame Bonne Ami's House of Exotic Comforts for the Recently Departed, "but you should know that even as we speak he is playing five-card stud with Loose Lips Louie."

I do not need to hear what Dead End Dugan will tell me next, because like almost everyone else except maybe Bet-A-Million McNabb, I know that Loose Lips Louie acquires his name by beating every member of a battleship's crew out of their savings in a single night, and his specialty is five-card stud, which indeed he has used to sink more than one ship's crew.

"In fact," Dugan is saying, "he is taking such a bath that about twenty minutes ago he has to change his name to Bet-A-Thousand McNabb."

"I have to get to him and collect my ten thousand dollars before he loses it all to Loose Lips Louie," I say. "Where is this game going on?"

"At Harvey Wallbanger's Social and Sporting Club for Gentlemen of Quality," says Dugan.

"Isn't that where Morris the Mage hangs out?" says Benny.

I frown. "Come to think of it, yes, that has become his home away from home."

"Do you suppose he is helping Louie to win?" continues Benny.

"I don't know, but we might as well play it safe and take our own protection along."

"Where is he?" asks Benny.

"In the men's room, where he always is," says Joey Chicago. "He doesn't like to be disturbed."

"He will have to live with it," I say, heading off to the men's room, where I find Big-Hearted Milton seated on the floor as usual, surrounded by five black candles and reading a book.

"Why are you bothering me when I am studying the ancient grimoires?" he says, slipping the book into a suit pocket.

"Come on, Milton," I say. "I see the title before you can hide it, and it is Meter Maids in Bondage."

"Some grimoires are less ancient than others," he says defensively.

"Get up," I say. "We have work to do."

"Obviously someone has welched on a bet," says Milton as we emerge from the men's room and rejoin the others. "Who was it?"

"Bet-a-Million McNabb," I answer.

"Bet-a-Million McNabb always makes good his losses," Milton assures me.

"Even as we speak, he is playing five-card stud with Loose Lips Louie over at Harvey Wallbanger's establishment," I tell him.

"A taxi will not do," says Milton suddenly. "We need a nonstop jet plane."

"It is only three blocks," I point out.

"Do you know how much he can lose to Loose Lips Louie in three blocks' time?" says Milton. Then he adds: "Has Louie got a protector in his corner?"

"I do not know for sure," I answer, "but if so, there is every likelihood that it is Morris the Mage."

"That twerp?" laughs Milton. "Why, he couldn't put a spell on his own mother!"

"I would not be too sure of that," says Joey Chicago. "The last I hear of her, she is in a cage on the moon."

"Maybe McNabb put the money aside," suggests Benny hopefully. "No one will ever bet with him again if word gets out that he won't make good his marker and pay his bookie."

"How much do you think he will have left to bet after Loose Lips Louie gets done with him?" I shoot back. "Come on! We are going to Harvey Wallbanger's!"

"And a Merry Christmas to you, too," mutters Joey Chicago as the five of us walk out through the space where the door used to be.

* * *

Harvey Wallbanger's Social and Sporting Club for Gentlemen of Quality manages to put three lies in a

single title, because it is not a social club unless you are of a mind to pay fifty dollars or more for a very short term date, it is not a sporting club because all of the games are rigged and the drinks are watered, and the only gentlemen of quality are those who give the place a wide berth.

We walk in the door, and suddenly I think maybe the place is on fire, because there is so much cigar smoke that I can barely see my hand in front of my face, and finally I realize that it is not my hand but that it belongs to something that is sort of green and kind of scaly but is mostly big, and when the smoke clears a little I realize that it is attached to Gregory the Gorgon, who is the muscle that protects Harvey Wallbanger's establishment from unwanted intruders, which is to say from those who can spot a crooked deck or a rigged roulette wheel.

"Hold it right there," says Gregory. He points to Dead End Dugan. "No zombies allowed."

"Why not?" I ask.

"What if I have to chastise him?" says Gregory. "What can one do to a malingerer who is already dead?"

I turn to Dugan and tell him to wait outside.

"Can I just stand here in the doorway?" asks Dugan. "The smoke keeps the flies away."

"This is not in the playbook," says Gregory. "I shall have to get a ruling from the Supreme Authority," which could be Harvey or God, but by the strictest interpretation of the term is probably Mrs. Wallbanger. "You may stand here until I return."

"Thank you," says Dugan.

"Just don't start doing a bunch of dead things until I get back," says Gregory as he shuffles off, and I can tell by Dugan's puzzled expression that for the life of him—or maybe it is for the death of him—he cannot think of any dead things to do, other than standing there without breathing.

"Come along," I say to Milton and Benny and Gently Gently. "We must collect from Bet-a-Million McNabb while he still has something to collect."

We begin walking through the many rooms of the establishment, each of which features a contest that under other circumstances might be called a game of chance. There are a number of lovely young ladies selling drinks and cigarettes and occasionally themselves, and what they lack in clothing they more than make up for in personality.

I hear a bunch of jolly laughing up ahead, and who should I run into but Nick the Saint, who is decked out in his Christmas best.

"Hi, Harry," he says. "Merry Christmas, ho ho ho."

"Hello, Nick," I reply. "Are you not supposed to be making your rounds this evening?"

"Yes," he says. "This is my night, ho ho ho. I just thought I'd stop off for a drink first, and see if there were any elves to recruit."

"I hate to be the bearer of bad tidings," I say, "but the young lady you are resting your hand upon is probably not an elf."

"You never know," says Nick. "But just the same, I trust news of this will not make its way up North?"

"My lips are sealed," I say.

"Mine, too," adds Big-Hearted Milton.

"I owe you one, Harry, " he says, and then adds "Ho ho ho."

"If you are planning on staying here for another fifteen minutes, you can square your account with me," I say, and then I tell him how, and he agrees, and I can see he plans to spend at least fourteen of those fifteen minutes exploring every possibility that the young lady next to him is an elf in disguise.

I leave him explaining exactly the kind of Christmas present he plans to give her once his sleigh ride is over, and finally we come to a small room, and there is Bet-a-Million McNabb sitting across a table from Loose Lips Louie, and behind Louie is Impervious Irving, who calls himself Louie's financial advisor, and in truth I suppose putting people who want Louie's money into the hospital does Louie's finances more good than even twenty motivated stockbrokers.

"Gentlemen," says Impervious Irving by way of greeting, "I do not wish to be anti-social, but you are intruding in a private room and more to the point are interrupting a private game."

"We shall tarry no longer than is necessary," I say, "but I have a prior claim on ten large from Bet-a-Million McNabb."

"I am desolate to hear this," says Loose Lips Louie, who appears to be anything but desolate, "but he became Bet-a-Hundred McNabb about five minutes ago."

"I am having a terrible run of luck, Harry," says McNabb, "but it is due to change any minute."

"In this place?" says Benny. "It'll change about as soon as Impervious Irving changes his socks, which means seven years of bad luck will seem like a blessing by comparison."

"Boss, do I have to stand here and take this?" demands Impervious Irving.

"I believe I can solve your problem," says Big-Hearted Milton. He makes a sign in the air and mutters something that has a lot of syllables and almost no vowels, and suddenly there is a poof! and Impervious Irving is somewhere else, though where I do not know for another minute. Then Loose Lips Louie yells for Morris the Mage, who comes in from the next room, still holding his poker hand.

"Morris," says Louie, "this goniff has vanished Impervious Irving. Bring him back!"

Morris closes his eyes and starts chanting what sounds like a song they cut out of a show that folded on its pre-Broadway tour, and then he snaps his fingers and says "Abra cadaver" and suddenly Impervious Irving is back in his accustomed position just to the right of Louie's chair.

Irving glares at Milton and says, "If you are going to vanish me to a bathroom again, next time make it one that's got a magazine to read."

"I've hexed it so he can't transport you again," says Morris. He turns to Milton. "You can still make him disappear, of course, but do you really want to be in the same room with an outraged but invisible Irving?"

Milton waves his hands wildly. "Begone!" he says.

"I was just leaving anyway," says Morris, and vanishes.

I notice that Milton is wearing a great big grin on his face, and I ask him why.

"When Morris comes in here he is holding a full house, jacks over sevens," says Milton. "But when he

leaves he is holding a pair of fours and nothing else."

"Let us get back down to business," I say. "Bet-a-Hundred McNabb owes me ten thousand dollars."

"I don't deny it," says McNabb. "But even more than I don't deny it, I don't have it. It all resides within Loose Lips Louie's vest pocket, unless some of it has fallen onto the floor."

"This is the truth," confirms Louie. "I am afraid you are too late, Harry."

"I have a prior claim on the money that is in your pocket," I say.

"Then file your claim with Bet-a-Hundred McNabb," says Louie.

"I do not slake my thirst from empty glasses," I say, which I think is a brilliant rejoinder, but I can see that neither Louie nor Irving understand it, so I point out that I could get more blood from a turnip than money from McNabb.

"What the hell," says Louie. "This being Christmas Eve, I will give you a chance to win your money back from me."

"I never bet," I say. "Betting is for suckers."

"Losing is for suckers," says Louie. He flashes some of the money he has rescued from McNabb's clutches. "Winning is for"—he searches for the bon motte—"winners."

I stare at McNabb, who still doesn't know he is a sheep, let alone that he has been fleeced. "All right," I say at last. "What did you have in mind?"

"How about a nice friendly game of five-card stud?" suggests Louie.

"I have lost my trust in this establishment," I answer.

"Oh?" he says. "When?"

"When we still lived in caves," I say.

"What do you suggest then?"

"I am sure you will agree that we are the two most prodigious intellects in Harvey Wallbanger's, if not on the face of the entire planet," I begin.

"Yeah, that seems a reasonable premise," says Louie.

"What if we engage in a mental contest instead of a game of chance?" I say.

"I lost a toe in the war," he says, "so if it's a mathematical question, the answer can't be any higher than nineteen."

"No, you only have to count to eight for this one," I reply.

"I don't want you to think I distrust you, Harry," says Louie. "But I distrust you, Harry. First you tell me what the contest is all about, and then I'll tell you if we have a bet."

I stare at him and say, "I will bet you twenty large—the ten you took from McNabb, and ten more for my trouble—that I can name more of Nick the Saint's reindeer than you can."

"Don't do that, Boss!" says Gently Gently. "You tried it at Joey Chicago's and got it wrong."

"We learn from our mistakes," I tell him.

"Not always," says Gently Gently. "After all, I'm still going out with Sylvia."

"Well, it works in principle," I say.

"I just read the poem about Nick and his reindeer to my nephew," says Louie. "So if you get 'em all right and I get 'em all right, all we've done is waste a bunch of time."

I am waiting for Big-Hearted Milton to catch on, and finally he does, and just like Sandy Koufax or Roger Clemens he hurls his high hard one into Impervious Irving's brain, where it has a lot of breathing room, and Irving says, "I got an idea, Boss."

"I hope it's a small one," says Louie. "You got to take it easy with a new discipline."

"You gonna listen or not?" asks Irving.

Louie looks up at Impervious Irving, who is maybe eight feet tall and almost as wide, and he says, "I am always happy to hear your thoughts on any matter, if for no other reason than that they constitute a considerable rarity. Now, what is your idea?"

"Make him agree that you win on ties," says Irving. "If you each get three right, or six, or all eight, you win."

"It is a wonderful idea, especially for a beginner," says Louie, "but Harry is a sophisticated man of the world. He will never go for it."

"It is late and I want my money," I say. "I accept your conditions."

It is a shame that Louie is not born a hundred and fifty years ago in Tombstone, because Doc Holliday and Johnny Ringo never reach for their guns half as fast as he reaches for my hand to shake it and cement the conditions.

"You all saw that we shook on it," he says. "Now, since I am a generous and genial host and this is my private room, I will allow Harry the Book to go first."

"Okay," I say, clearing my throat. "Here goes. Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Donder, Blitzen, Cupid and Flyaway."

Loose Lips Louie emits a delighted laugh. "I don't even need to invoke Irving's rule. The reindeer are Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Donder, Blitzen, Cupid and Comet."

"Nosir," I say. "They are Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Donder, Blitzen, Cupid and Flyaway."

"You are wrong, Harry," says Louie. "There is no reindeer called Flyaway."

"There most certainly is," I say, "and you owe me twenty large."

I wait for Milton to hurl a second idea to Impervious Irving.

"Boss," says Irving, "Nick the Saint's in the next room. Why don't we just pull him in here and ask him?"

"I'll get him," says Benny.

"I do not trust any of Harry's toadies anywhere near him," says Louie. "Irving, go get him and bring him back."

"I am not a toady," says Benny heatedly as Irving leaves the room.

"Oh?" says Louie. "And what are you, then?"

"I am one of Harry's flunkies," replies Benny with a note of pride.

Irving is back a minute later. He has Nick the Saint in tow, and Nick has his young lady in tow.

"What can I do for you gents, ho ho ho?" asks Nick.

"We need you to settle a disagreement," answers Louie.

"Okay, but it's got to be quick," says Nick. "I'm already late getting started on my rounds."

"It won't take long," says Louie. "What are the names of your reindeer?"

"Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Donder, Blitzen, Cupid and Flyaway," says Nick. "I thought everyone knew that."

"Morris!" screams Louie, and Morris the Mage appears a few seconds later. "Morris, he says one of his reindeer is named Flyaway. Is he lying?"

Morris stares at Nick for a minute, mutters a spell, snaps his fingers, and nibbles a breath mint.

"He's telling the truth," says Morris.

"Well, if that's all," says Nick, "Elmer here and I have to be going."

"Elmer?" says Gently Gently, kind of blinking and staring at the girl.

Nick nods. "She's my newest elf," he says. "And this way if I happen to drop her name in front of you-know-who, there won't be one of her usual scenes. Well, Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night."

He and Elmer leave, Morris vanishes, and Loose Lips Louie glares at me.

"I don't know how you did it, Harry, but I'm going to find out."

"I wish you as much luck as you wish McNabb," I say. "And now, my twenty large, please?"

He mutters such a complex curse that Morris pops into existence and Milton vanishes for a moment, and finally he shoves the money across the table to me.

"So am I off the hook, Harry?" asks McNabb.

"At least until you're Bet-a-Thousand McNabb," I say. "Come on back to Joey Chicago's with us. I'm buying."

McNabb joins us as we walk to the exit, which was the entrance on the way in, and we pick up Dead End Dugan, who still has a puzzled expression on his face, and I know he has not yet thought of any dead things to do, and a few minutes later we're all standing at the bar at Joey Chicago's, sharing a bottle of Comrade Terrorist vodka, and Big-Hearted Milton explains to everyone in the place how I do a favor for Nick the Saint and in exchange he changes Comet's name to Flyaway, and everyone seems to be

having a good time, until I hear Benny Fifth Street start yelling and a minute later Gently Gently Dawkins is yelling back.

"What's the problem?" I ask, when they finally pause for breath.

"We are having an argument about the Seven Dwarfs," says Gently Gently. "Benny says they are Bashful, Sleepy, Sneezy, Dumbo, Doc, Grumpy, and Marvin, and I say . . ."

I find myself wondering if Nick has room for one more oversized elf on his sleigh.