

The Hex Is In: A Harry the Book Story

Mike Resnick

So I am sitting there in the stands, and the Pittsburgh Pompadoodles are beating the Manhattan Misfits by a score of 63 to 10, which is not unexpected since the Misfits have not won a game since John Alden had a fling with Pocahontas, and I am silently cursing my luck, because the point spread is 46, and if the Misfits could have managed just one more touchdown, I would not have to pay off any bets to either side.

But it is the fourth quarter, and there are only twenty-two seconds left on the clock, and the Misfits are eighty-seven yards away from paydirt, and the Pompadoodles have been beating them like a drum all day. And then, suddenly, Godzilla Monsoon finds a hole off left tackle, and he races through it, and two of the Pompadoodles' defensive backs run into each other, and damned if he hasn't passed the midfield mark and is racing toward the end zone. Everyone is chasing him, but Godzilla's got a head of steam up, and no one gets close to him. Now he's at the forty-yard line, now he's at the thirty, now the twenty—and then, just as I'm counting my profits, a piano falls out of the sky on top of him, and the ref whistles the play dead on the eight-yard line.

Benny Fifth Street turns to me, a puzzled expression on his face. "You ever seen it rain pianos before?" he asks.

"Not that I can remember," I admit.

"I wonder if it was a Steinway," says Gently Gently Dawkins, who is sitting on the other side of me.

"What difference does it make?" I ask.

"Them Steinways are always a little flat in the upper scales," he says.

"You want to see flat, take a look at Godzilla Monsoon," offers Benny Fifth Street.

"You guys are getting off the point," I say.

"Was there one?" asks Gently Gently Dawkins.

"The subject was rain," answers Benny. "I suppose if it can rain cats and dogs, it can rain pianos every once in a while."

"The subject," I say, "is who wanted the Pompadoodles to beat the spread?"

"That should be easy enough," says Benny. "Who put some serious money on the Pompadoodles?"

"Everybody," says Gently Gently, chuckling in amusement. "The last time the Misfits won they were the New Amsterdam Misfits—and then they only won because the other team was attacked by Indians on the way to the game and never showed up."

I give what has occurred a little serious thought, and then I say, "You know, pianos hardly ever fall out of the sky on their own."

"Maybe it fell out of an airplane," says Gently Gently.

"Or maybe a roc was carrying it off to its nest," adds Benny.

"Rocks don't fly," protests Gently Gently. "They just lie there quietly, and sometimes they grow moss,

which I figure is like a five o'clock shadow for inanimate objects.”

“You guys are missing the point,” I say. “Clearly the hex is in, and I paid my hex protection to Big-Hearted Milton. If the piano was going to fall on anyone, it should have fallen on the referee, who’s been blowing calls all afternoon.”

“Or the tuba player in the band,” adds Benny. “He’s always off key.”

“So why didn’t Milton stop it, or at least misdirect it?” I continue.

“Speaking of Milton, here,” says Gently Gently, handing me five one-hundred-dollar bills.

“If I speak of Milton, will you lay another five C-NOTES on me?” asked Benny curiously.

“This is a bet,” answers Gently Gently. “I forgot to give it to you.”

“From Big-Hearted Milton?” I say, frowning.

“Right. He gave it to me at halftime.”

“But Milton never bets,” I say. “It’s against the rules of the Mages Guild.”

“I heard they tossed him out for nonpayment,” says Benny.

“Which team did he bet on, as if I didn’t know?” I ask.

“The Pompadoodles, of course,” answers Gently Gently.

“Well, that explains why he didn’t stop the piano,” puts in Benny.

I get to my feet. “I’ll see you guys later.”

“Where are you going, Harry?” asks Benny.

“I got to pay off all the guys who bet on Pittsburgh, and then I have to have a talk with Milton.”

“Where will you find him?”

“Same place as always,” I reply.

So I do like I say, and pay Longshot Louie and Velma the Vamp and Hagridden Henry and all the others, and then I head over to Joey Chicago’s Bar, where my office is the third booth on the left, and I toss my hat there and then go to men’s room, where I find Big-Hearted Milton sitting on the tile floor as usual, surrounded by five candles and half-singing half-muttering some chant.

“Milton,” I say, “we’ve got to talk.”

“Why, Harry the Book—what a surprise,” he says. “Wait’ll I finish this spell.” He goes back to chanting in a tongue so alien that it might very well be French. Finally he looks up. “Okay, I’m done. Did you bring my money?”

“That’s what we have to talk about,” I say.

“All right,” he says, getting to his feet and snuffing out the candles with his shoe. “But I want you to know that I’m protected against spells, curses, betrayals, demonic visitations, and small nuclear devices.”

“Are you protected against a punch in the nose?” I ask.

He frowns and looks worried. “No.”

“Then let’s talk.”

“About my money?”

“About Godzilla Monsoon getting flattened by a piano.”

“He’ll be all right,” says Milton. “It fell on his head. It’s not as if it hit him in the knee or anything he ever uses.”

“Why did it hit him at all?” I ask. “And just when he was about to wipe out the spread?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” whimpers Milton.

“Come on, Milton,” I say. “The only time in five years you make a bet, and nine million pounds of music falls down on the guy who’s about to make you lose?”

“I didn’t do it.”

“Maybe you didn’t drop it,” I say. “But I pay for hex protection, and you didn’t stop it.”

“It’s too complicated to explain,” says Milton. “Just give me my winnings and we’ll agree never to discuss it again.”

“Come on, Milton,” I say. “You can tell me what’s going on. We’ve known each other for fifteen years now.”

“We’ve been friends for fifteen years?” he says, surprised. “How time flies.”

“I didn’t say we were friends. I said we’ve known each other. Now, what the hell is going on?”

He cups his hand to his ear. “They’re calling you from the bar, Harry.”

“The bar’s empty, except for Joey Chicago, who was guzzling some Old Peculiar from the tap when I walked through.”

He looks at his wrist. “Oh, my goodness, look at the time!” he exclaims. “I’m late for an appointment. I really must run.”

“Milton, you’re not wearing a watch,” I point out.

“I pawned it,” he says. “But I remember where the hands should be.”

“Milton,” I say, “I just want you to know that this hurts me more than it hurts you.”

And with that, I haul off and punch him in the nose.

He hits the ground with a thud!, pulls out a handkerchief to try to push the blood back into his nostrils, and climbs slowly to his feet.

“You were wrong, Harry,” he says reproachfully. “It hurts me much more than it hurt you.”

“An honest mistake,” I say. “And now, unless you tell me what’s going on, I am going to make honest

mistakes all over your face.”

“All right, all right,” he says. “But let’s leave my office and go to yours. I feel the need of a drink.”

We emerge from the men’s room and walk over to my booth, where Milton orders us each an Old Washensox.

“My treat,” he says. “Joey, put ’em on my tab.”

“I been meaning to talk to you about your tab,” says Joey.

“Holler when it hits fifty,” says Milton.

“I been hollering since it hit twenty, for all the good it’s done me,” answers Joey.

Joey brings us our beers, mutters the usual about firing Milton and hiring Morris the Mage to protect the place, and goes back to the bar.

“All right,” says Milton, “here’s the situation. I find myself a little short for money this year”—which is not a surprise; Milton has been short for money since Teddy Roosevelt charged up San Juan Hill—“and suddenly someone throws a beautiful gift in my lap.”

“What was her name?” asks Joey, who was listening from behind the bar.

“Opportunity,” says Milton.

“Not much of a name,” says Joey, making a face. “I prefer Bubbles, or maybe Fifi.”

“So tell me about this opportunity,” I say, as Joey leans forward to get her measurements.

“Gerhardt the Goblin—you know, that little green critter who’s always screaming ‘Down in front!’ at Tasteful Teddy’s 5-Star Burlesque Emporium—anyway, Gerhardt approaches me one day last week and tells me that he’s got a client who wants to put five hundred down on the Pompadoodles, but doesn’t want to do it himself, and that if I knew anyone who would act as a middleman, he’d get twenty percent of the winnings.”

“And you don’t know who you’re working for?”

“I’m working for me,” says Milton with dignity. “I don’t know whose money I’m betting, but that’s a whole different matter.”

“Where can I find Gerhardt?” I ask.

“Beside Tasteful Teddy’s?” says Milton. “He loves betting on the lady mud wrestlers over at Club Elegante.” He lowered his voice confidentially. “They’re the only wrestling matches in the whole city that aren’t fixed.”

“You know,” I say, “I’ve been there a couple of times—just for the coffee, mind you; I paid no attention to the wrestlers at all—but I don’t remember any of the matches having a winner.”

“They don’t.”

“Then what’s to bet on?”

“Which one gets naked first. How long before they’re so covered with mud you can’t tell ’em apart.

How many men say they just go there for the coffee. That kind of thing.”

“Is there anything else you can tell me?” I ask.

“Not a thing.”

“Okay, Milton,” I say, getting up. “I’ll see you soon.”

“You’re leaving?”

“Yes,” I say.

“Where’s my money?” he asks.

“Right here,” I say, patting my vest pocket. “And it’s my money.”

“Aw, come on, Harry,” he pleads. “Show a little charity.”

“You insist?” I say.

“I do.”

“Okay,” I say. “Tomorrow I’ll hunt up some charitable organization that repairs pianos.”

Then, before he can say another word, I am out the door.

I stop by Club Elegante looking for Gerhardt the Goblin, grab a ringside table, and when he hasn’t shown up by the seventh match, I decide to leave, especially because the next match features Botox Betty, who once broke her hand slapping my face over a friendly misunderstanding and a couple of intimate pinches, and Lizzie the Lizard, who shed her skin faster than French Fatima shed her clothes over at Tasteful Teddy’s.

By the time I get to my apartment, Benny Fifth Street is already there, watching replays of the piano flattening Godzilla Monsoon just as he crosses the ten-yard line, followed by a hospital interview with Godzilla, who doesn’t sound any more punch-drunk than usual, and finally a statement from the winning coach to all the young Pompadoodle fans out there that they should never neglect their music lessons because today clearly proves that music is important to their daily lives, and without music they might only have won by 46 points and disappointed all the big Pittsburgh plungers who bet on them to beat the spread.

Gently Gently Dawkins shows up just as we turn off the television—he was busy eating his fourth meal of the day, which puts him maybe two hours behind his normal schedule—and I tell them what Milton told me.

“Clearly, it’s got to be some Pittsburgh fan,” says Gently Gently.

“Why?” I reply. “You don’t have to be a Pittsburgh fan to fix a game.”

“You don’t?” he ask, frowning, and I can see he’s still a few thousand calories short of functioning on all cylinders.

“No,” I say. “Maybe this isn’t confined to Milton, or even to Manhattan. I mean, it’s got to cost a lot of loot to get a wizard good enough to pull that stunt with the piano. Maybe we should see if anything like that has happened anywhere else.”

“How should we go about it?” asks Benny.

“Start by calling Vegas. See if anything like today has happened when it looked like an underdog might win, or even just beat the spread.”

“I’ll do it,” says Gently Gently.

“Are you sure?” asks Benny. “I don’t mind making the call.”

“No problem,” says Gently Gently.

“Okay,” I say. “The phone’s in the next room.”

“I know,” he says, getting up. “So are the cookies.”

“He eats three more cookies and a biscuit, and you won’t need Milton to hex the bad guys,” says Benny, as Gently Gently leaves the room. “Just have him breathe on ’em, or maybe step on their toes.”

Gently Gently is back out in less than a minute.

“That was fast,” I say.

“It was all negative,” he replies. “No one’s dropped a piano anywhere.” He pauses. “Some Acme Movers dropped a pipe organ carrying it into a church out there, if that helps.”

“Not a whole lot,” says Benny.

“Anyway, our contact’s sorry, but no pianos. The only weird thing they’ve had out there is the tidal wave.”

“A tidal wave?” I repeat. “In Las Vegas?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Funny, isn’t it?”

“Tell me about it,” I say.

“No one was hurt,” says Gently Gently. “It comes from out of nowhere and practically drowns Nasty Nick Norris just when he’s about to pull a 300-to-1 upset in their tennis tournament, and then as quick as it comes, it goes away. I think they would have been convinced it was a mass hallucination, except that they found half a dozen codfish and a sea urchin stuck in the net.”

I pull out my abacus and dope out the odds that the tidal wave and the piano aren’t related. Since the abacus can’t compute any higher than a google-to-one, it melts.

“What have a Vegas tennis match and a New York football game got in common?” I muse.

Gently Gently raises his hand. “They’re both sports?”

I ignore him and say, “We need to find the connection. Someone’s paying a hell of an expensive wizard to rig these events, which means someone’s making a bundle on them—someone who doesn’t want his name to be known.”

“That does not make a lot of sense,” opines Benny. “So someone is paying a wizard. That doesn’t mean he has to hide his own name. Anyone can lay a bet. Are you sure Milton wasn’t holding something back?”

“Pretty sure,” I say. “But even if he is, he knows that I am also holding something back from him”—I pat my wallet—“and we can trade whenever he wants.”

“You mind if I turn on the TV?” asks Gently Gently.

“Trying to find out who’s robbing us doesn’t interest you enough?” asks Benny.

“It ain’t that,” explains Gently Gently. “But I got a sawbuck down on Loathesome Lortonoi in the seventh at Del Mar, and it’s almost post time.”

“You bet with some other totally illegal bookie?” demands Benny.

“It ain’t ethical to bet with the illegal bookie I work for,” responds Gently Gently. He searches for the right words. “It’s a conscript of interns.”

“Let him watch,” I say. “It’s easier than arguing with him.”

The picture comes on, and the horses are already parading to the post.

“There’s Loathesome Lortonoi!” says Gently Gently, pointing to a huge black horse who looks like he and his rider should be chasing Ichabod Crane around Sleepy Hollow. “They shipped him out there just for this race. It’s a perfect spot for him.”

There are six horses approaching the starting gate. Four of them look like close relatives of Loathesome Lortonoi. The sixth horse looks like he should be pulling a death cart in medieval Graustark, or maybe be spread throughout a few hundred cans of dog food. Even the flies avoid him. His jockey looks like he wishes he could wear a brown paper bag over his head. The tote board says he’s 750-to-1.

“Is that Pondscum?” asks Benny.

“No, it’s just a little smudge on the screen,” says Gently Gently.

“I mean the horse.”

Gently Gently pulls a Racing Form out of his pocket and looks at it. “Yes, it is. Have you seen him before?”

“He was losing races back when I was in grammar school,” says Benny. “He was the slowest, ugliest horse in the world even then.”

The horses enter the gate, and a few seconds later the doors spring open and Loathesome Lortonoi comes out of there like a bat out of hell, and before they hit the far turn he’s fifteen lengths in front. The next four horses are spread out over another thirty lengths. Pondscum isn’t even in the picture.

They hit the homestretch, and now Loathesome Lortonoi is twenty lengths in front—and suddenly the crowd starts screaming, and the announcer gets so excited he starts whistling and cheering and forgets to say what’s happening, but he doesn’t have to because in another two seconds Pondscum enters the picture. He is going maybe ninety miles an hour, and it seems like his feet are hardly touching the ground—and then I realize that his feet are hardly touching the ground, because somehow while rounding the far turn he has sprouted wings and is literally flying down the home stretch. He catches Loathesome Lortonoi with a sixteenth of a mile to go and wins by thirty lengths.

Gently Gently turns to me. “Is that fair?” he asks in hurt, puzzled tones.

“We’ll know in a minute,” I say. And sure enough, a minute later the result is official and Pondscum

returns \$1,578.20 for a two-dollar bet.

I turn to Benny. "Who do we know out there?"

Benny consults his little book. "The biggest bookie working Del Mar is No-Neck McGee."

"Give me his number," I say, and a moment later I dial it, and No-Neck McGee picks it up on the third ring.

"Hi, No-Neck," I say. "This is Harry the Book."

"Harry," he says. "Long time no see."

"No, I can see again," I tell him. "Wanda the Witch's spell only lasted a couple of weeks."

"So what can I do for you on this most terrible of days? Did you see what just happened in the seventh?"

"That's what I want to ask you about."

"I'm making a formal complaint to the Jockey Club."

"It'll never hold up," I say. "There's nothing in the rules that says a horse can't have wings."

"Just as there's nothing in the rules that says he can't have blinkers, or shoes for that matter. I'm basing my case not on the fact that he had wings but that he didn't declare them prior to the race, the way you have to declare all other equipment. Is that what you're calling about? Did someone pull the same trick up at Belmont?"

"No," I say. "I just want to know if you had any big plungers on Pondscum?"

"I took just one bet on him," answers No-Neck. "Problem is, it was for six hundred dollars. That's why I've filed the complaint. Paying it off will break me."

"Who placed the bet?" I ask.

"An ex-jockey who hangs around the track all the time," says No-Neck. "Remember Charlie Roman-off?"

"Chinless Charlie?" I say. "Didn't he get ruled off the track for life?"

"Life or three hundred years, whichever comes first," answers No-Neck. "Anyway, he lays the bet, but he's never seen six hundred dollars at one time in his life, so I know he is someone else's stalking horse. Or is it stalking better?"

"Thanks, No-Neck," I say. "That's what I needed to know."

"Glad you called today," says No-Neck. "I have a feeling my phone will be disconnected by next week."

We hang up, and I turn back to Benny and Gently Gently. "I think I'm starting to see the light," I say.

"I don't know how you can," says Gently Gently. "It's almost nine o'clock at night."

"Give your Form to Benny and go into the next room for another cookie," I say, and he does so faster than Pondscum or even Godzilla Monsoon ever moved.

"I can tell by your face you got an idea," says Benny. "Or maybe it's just a sty in your eye. But it's

something.”

“It’s an idea,” I say. “It comes back to your question: Why would someone hide the fact that he was laying bets? After all, betting is legal at the track and in Vegas, and it’s almost legal with bookies.”

“I already asked that,” says Benny.

“The logical answer is that the hex was in, and he didn’t want people to know that he was the one who made the bet.”

“Yes, that makes sense,” says Benny. “But we already know the race and the game and the match were hexed.”

“But we know something else,” I say. “We know that the kind of wizard who can cause a tidal wave or do the other things does not come cheap. So the next thing to do is find out who can afford three such wizards on the same day.”

“There’s hundreds of guys with that kind of loot just in Manhattan,” says Benny. “It’s like finding a blonde in a haystack.”

“Don’t you mean a needle?” I ask.

“I found a needle in a haystack once,” he answers. “I’ve never found a blonde.”

I couldn’t argue with that, so I went back to the subject at hand. “We can work it from either end,” I say. “We can narrow it down by finding someone who could afford all three wizards, or we can narrow it down by finding out just which wizards have the power to pull these stunts off.”

“Too many either way,” says Benny, as Gently Gently comes back into the room. “There’s a third way.”

“Oh?” I say. “What it is?”

“Pound the hell out of Big-Hearted Milton until he tells you who gave him the money.”

“It could have passed through four or five hands before it got to Milton,” I say.

“That narrows it down,” says Gently Gently. “Who do we know who has four or five hands?”

I send him out to a chili parlor.

“You know,” I say when he is gone, “I think the money is the key to it all.”

“Of course it is,” agrees Benny. “No money, no hexes.”

“No,” I say. “I mean, I think you hit on something before. There are hundreds of possible plungers, and dozens of possible wizards, but there’s only one pay-off, and that’s the one I have to make to Milton.”

“You’re going to pay him?”

“Tomorrow,” I say. “Tonight there’s something I have to do. Get me Morris the Mage’s phone number.”

I talk to Morris, and we agree on a price, and he casts his spell and gives me the magic word, and the next morning I hunt up Milton in the men’s room at Joey Chicago’s, where he is sitting fully clothed on one of the toilets, his nose covered in bandages, reading an ancient book of magic.

“Good morning, Milton,” I say pleasantly.

“I ab nod talkig to you,” he says through the bandages.

“That’s too bad,” I say. “Because I have sought you out to pay my debt of honor.”

I pull out the money and hand it to him.

He smiles, gets up, puts the money in a pocket, and walks to the door.

“Thag you, Harry,” he says. “I god to deliver this. I’ll see you lader.”

He walks out of the men’s room, through the tavern, and out the front door, and I go back to the apartment, where Benny and Gently Gently have spent the night. (Well, Benny spent the whole night; Gently Gently made four more trips out for nine-thousand-calorie snacks.)

“Is it accomplished?” asks Benny.

“Let’s give it an hour,” I say.

Benny spends the time staring at his watch and counting down minute by minute. Finally it is time.

“He’s got to have delivered it by now,” I say, “and whoever he’s delivered it to hasn’t had time to get to a bank. So let’s make sure he thinks twice before trying to rob Harry the Book again.” I pause for dramatic effect, and then say: “Abracadabra.”

“That’s it?” asks Benny. “Nothing’s happened.”

“It’s not going to happen here,” I say. “Turn on the news in another hour and we’ll see if it worked.”

Benny counts down from sixty to zero once more, and then turns on the television. The news is on all the channels: The estate of Mafia don Boom-Boom Machiavelli has spontaneously caught fire and burned to the ground.

“And that’s that!” says Benny, rubbing his hands together gleefully.

“Not quite,” I say.

“Oh?”

“Milton never used a bank or a safe in his life, which means his share caught fire in his pocket. Find out what hospital he’s in and send him some flowers.”

“Any note with it?” asks Benny.

“Yeah,” I say. “Tell him that if God had meant pianos to fly, He’d have given them wings.”

Gently Gently looks surprised. “You mean He didn’t?”