

HIS OWN PETARD

"Steven, can you come over right away?" Ann's uncharacteristically flat, hollow voice asked.

Some people find it odd that a science fiction writer, in this day and age, should choose to live without a modem, a pager, or a fax machine. I'm of the opinion that modern technology has made it *too* easy for people to get in touch with each other. I concentrate for a living, or rather, I try my damndest. But you *have* to have a phone—at least, if you want to make a living. Damn it.

Well, that's why God made answering machines. It was a cold night outside, and I had been hard at work when the phone rang. Ann was a friend: she knew I often turned off the speaker on the machine so I could concentrate on writing without interruption. She was a friend: she wouldn't be too disappointed if I didn't pick up the call.

She was *a good* friend, and she sounded like she needed help badly ...

I hesitated with my hand an inch from the phone, thinking that the definition of "friend" should be, "someone you don't have to make excuses to."

"Rubin's dead," her voice said. "I was there."

Well, that would have been more than enough to fetch me—at any time of day or night, in any weather. But then she clinched it ... by bursting into tears.

I picked up the handset, said, "Fifteen min-utes," and hung up.

"Well," I said to my wife as I pulled on my shoes, "that was the most amazing call of the month."

"Who was it?" Mariko asked obligingly. A good straight man is welcome when you're in a hurry. "Ann. She says Rubin is down."

Her jaw dropped. "Billy Rubin? Dead?"

"Brown bread," I agreed. "She says she saw it happen."

"Wow. That is amazing."

I shook my head. "That's not the amazing part. Get this: *she didn't sound happy about it.*"

I left Mariko looking as puzzled as I was, and drove to Ann's place.

Ann is a science fiction writer too, just starting out. Tall, willowy, blonde, pleasant-faced and good-natured, in her late twenties. She's had a few short stories in small-press anthologies and fanzines, one real sale to *Analog*, and has had a novel ostensibly sold to Charnel House for the last eighteen months, although they still haven't given her a firm pub date yet. She's pretty good—good enough that if she has incredible luck, and lives long enough, one day she might be as poor as I am. I like her as a person, too. More important, my wife, who possesses a very subtly calibrated Jerk Detector, also likes her.

She was in rotten shape when I arrived at her flat. Tear-tracked, half in the bag, spattered with blood—Rubin's blood!—an uncapped half-empty bottle of vodka next to an open bag of grass on the coffee table. She was wearing a swatch of yellow POLICE-CRIME SCENE tape around her forehead like a ninja headband, canted rakishly over one eye. Her eyes were dangerously bright, and her voice was

higher in pitch than usual. I sat beside her on her sprung and faded couch while she told me the story.

"I know I shouldn't have," she said, "but I was desperate. Charnel House has had *The Cosmic Cabal* for almost three years now, and I haven't even been able to get that rat bastard down there to return a phone call or answer a query since he bought it—a year after I sent it to him. Any minute now, he'll get fired or move to another house, and my book will get published as an orphan ... if it's ever published at all."

"Your contract specifies a date they have to publish by, right?"

"Sure. And if they don't, I can take the book back ... and go tell other editors, 'I have a book here that someone else bought dirt-cheap and then decided not to bother printing after all, want a look?' And my agent says there's no point even *trying* to sell a *second* book until the first one's been out long enough to have some kind of track record to judge by ... Jesus, who'd have guessed you could bring your whole career to a shuddering halt by selling a book? I'm maxed out at Visa, the bank, and the credit union; even my parents are starting to tighten up. So I called Rubin."

"Jesus," I said, "that is desperate."

If you're new to science fiction, Billy Rubin was almost certainly the most influential critic in sf history, with a regular column in *Alternities*. He was also, in the nearly unanimous opinion of the membership of SFWA, a direct descendant of the Marquis de Sade. Almost any critic will pull the wings off a crippled fly, of course—it's part of the job description—but Rubin was the kind of guy who would stake out a pregnant female fly, slice her open without anesthesia, and pull the winglets off all her little fly feti in front of her eyes. Elegantly. It was he who called Pournelle "The King of The Cyber Rifles," accused Gibson of "reasoning incorrectly from data which he does not possess," dubbed Shepard "The Sultan of S.W.A.T.," summed up *The Jaws That Bite, The Claws That Catch* with "Beware the dub-dub book, and shun the four--and-a-quarter snatch," and reviewed a nonexistent book by Bradley called *Dragon Harass*. He's the one who created that whole resonant-sounding, ultimately meaningless and divisive dichotomy between the "anti-science" fiction writers and the "Aunty Science" fiction writers, which has had the whole field at each others' throats for a couple of years now. No matter how new to sf you are, this ought to convey something: *Harlan Ellison was polite to Rubin*.

In short, Rubin was to science fiction writers what Geraldo Rivera is to people of alter-nate lifestyles. No, worse, for the slimy bastard had a modicum of genuine wit, used a surgical scalpel rather than a clumsy bladder full of dung. He evinced a special fondness for flensing beginners. First novels were his favorite victims-of--choice: since few of his readers had actually read them, he was relieved of that onerous necessity himself, and the tyros had no cliques of friends to fight back for them. In a few famous cases he had actually succeeded in single-handedly aborting the publication of a first novel, by panning the galley proofs so savagely that the publisher changed his mind and decided to eat the advance.

In corollary, Rubin could also get a first novel published with a phone call, if he chose. Or hurry one along the pipeline. And he lived here in town . . .

"So I invited him out to dinner," Ann said.

"Ann, Ann," I said, shaking my head.

"Dammit, I was desperate! Don and Ev told me about a new restaurant in

Chinatown where the owner was so green he hadn't learned to confirm plastic before accepting it yet, so I had Rubin meet me there and stuffed him full of Szechuan. He was actually pleasant, for Rubin. Ordered the most expensive stuff, naturally, and of course he eats twice as much as a human—"

She tripped over the present tense. "Well, he did, anyway. And had five rye and gingers. So I played it very cool, didn't say a word about the book or the business, just kept the talk general. I charmed the shit out of him, Steven."

"Sure you did," I said soothingly.

"So I wait until we're outside the restaurant, walking toward where I'm parked so I can drive him home, and then I casually mention that I've got this novel stuck in the pipe at Charnel House . . ." Her face went to pieces.

I took her hand and held it until she could continue.

"It sounds like something out of a cheap porno movie," she said finally, "but I swear to God the moment I said that sentence, he got an erection. Wham, like that. I thought his pants were going to rip. And he gave me this *look*—" She began crying again.

I hugged her with some awkwardness. "He certainly lived up to his pen name," I said savagely.

Even through her tears, her puzzlement was plain.

"It's got to be a pseudonym," I explained. "He probably thought nobody else was smart enough to get it. Medical students are usually too busy to read. Bilirubin is a primary component of bile."

She snorted, but was still too upset to giggle, so I went on. "It has special relevance here. All bilirubin is, really, is red blood cells that died and decomposed. Dark brown goo. The liver skims it out of the blood, and passes it on to the intestines for disposal. It's why shit is brown ... and part of why it smells bad. Pretty appropriate name for him, huh?"

This time she did giggle—but only for a second, and then the giggle segued back into tears again. I gave up and held her. She would tell the rest of it when she was ready.

She had passed the point where further tears could be any help: the only thing that might make the nut now would be to get her to laugh somehow. And I couldn't see any angle of approach. I tried constructing something about "Rubin on rye . . . can't cut the mustard," but before it would jell she was speaking again and it was too late. Her voice was harsh, strident, full of self-disgust.

"I was going to do it. I knew what he was going to say, and I was just making up my mind to say yes. Can you understand that? I had time enough to know that I was going to say yes, and he had time to see it in my eyes. And then we saw them."

I already had a rough idea where she was going. "A gang."

"Yeah."

"What colors?"

She shook her head. "The cops wanted to know that too. All I saw was eyes—and blades. Generic Asian streetgang, that's all I can tell you. Lots of eyes. Lots of blades. All sharp. You know about the swords?"

I nodded grimly. This year the streetgangs all seemed to realize at once that fighting with guns uses up troops too fast, and has no element of skill. But fighting

with knives requires *too much* skill, gets in too close and nasty and personal, and also violates the "concealed weapon" statutes. So they began using swords. It started with Japanese kids wearing ceremonial samurai blades, for show—but the idea made so much sense from the streetgang point of view that before long, puzzled fencing supply outlets were sold out. It'll take the establishment at least another year to get the laws changed. Meanwhile the streetgangs all give each other Heidelberg scars—not that they'd understand the reference.

"Let me guess," I said. "Rubin ran away so fast his heart exploded."

She grimaced, as though she wanted to smile but was not entitled. "You know, that's *exactly* what I was expecting. I'm like: well, I better make sure I'm not in his way, wouldn't want to get trampled to death before I get a shot at being raped and cut. Or the other way around. You know: thinking how stupid I'd been to come to Chinatown without a man with me. And then he did it—or I guess I mean he was already doing it."

"Did what?"

"Nothing."

I sighed. "I see," I lied politely.

"No, I mean, he did nothing whatsoever to acknowledge their existence. He just kept right on walking. Like they weren't there. We're walking along, and these guys materialize in front of us, and I stop in my tracks so I can get mugged and killed like a decent citizen—and Rubin just keeps right on walking, and since he's just taken my arm, now I'm walking again too, and we walk right into the middle of them."

Making people laugh is a large part of what I do for a living ... but I sure didn't have much to work with, here. "Jesus."

"So this real little guy is right smack in front of us, like, small, but the moment you see his eyes you know he's the meanest guy in the gang, okay? And he waves that big shiny sword, and he goes, 'You can motor, Fatty, if you leave the slut.' And the rest close in from both sides ..."

She trailed off as the memory looped on her.

After a time, still hoping against hope for a way to get her laughing, I prompted, "So Billy died of happiness?"

She didn't even crack a smile. "He stopped, and he let go of my arm, and he walked right at that little snake. He just walked right at him, not even putting his hand out like he was going to push the guy out of his way, and he walked right onto the sword. He just kept walking until it came out his b-b-back, and ... and then he just stood there, locking eyes with the little guy, squirting blood all over him, looking sort of puzzled, until finally he ... he fell down and died. And the little guy just looked down at him—and then he walked away. Like, in tribute to his courage! Do you see? I owe my life to the heroism of *Billy Rubin!* I've lost even the luxury of hating him."

I began to laugh.

I couldn't help myself. Maybe it was the worst thing I could have done at that particular moment, as wrong as laughing can ever be—I knew I should be comforting my shocked and traumatized friend—but that just made it funnier. Unable to stop, unable to explain, I roared until the tears came.

Ann was nearly crying herself again by then—tears of anger this time, at me. And I couldn't blame her. But finally I got enough control to explain.

"Don't you get it?" I honked. "Jesus Christ, it's perfect! The son of a bitch was done in by the most ironic weapon imaginable: his own narrow mind. Woo ha boo! What an appropri-ate fate for a critic: he died of his own preconceptions! Oh, haw haw haw ... "

"What the hell are you talking about?" Ann demanded.

"Don't you see? Heroism, my left kidney! He literally didn't see that sword. Billy Rubin was *a science fiction critic*. He said it himself a hundred times in his column: he was fundamen-tally, constitutionally incapable of believing in a world that has *both* laser beams *and* sword fights!"

Her eyes widened ... and at long last, thank God, she began to laugh too.