



The Marshmallow Man

by Bruce Butterfield

RALPH shifted uncomfortably in the crowded bus; he wished there were a place to sit down so he could rest the great weight of his body that pressed unmercifully on his small legs. He was hemmed in on all sides by the masses of bodies and packages of the last-minute Christmas shoppers. Ralph disliked Christmas. It was just another working day for him, another day to cater to the sadistic whims of his customers. How much he wanted to rest, just for a few days, and not have to worry about anything. . . A woman tried to push her way past him toward the front of the bus, but he blocked her way. His bulk took up the aisle and he knew he was annoying her. It made him mad to see her discomfort, and he purposely pushed further back in the bus. Ralph sighed and put his hand in his pocket. He drew out a handful of coins and played with them absentmindedly. The bus lurched suddenly to a stop, and the money in Ralph's hand

cascaded down into the myriad of shuffling feet headed for the door. He looked down at the coins on the floor and thought of the effort it would be to pick them up. He let them lie and stepped out into the dirty slush of the street.

The cold December wind wailed through the canyons of buildings and screamed down every alley and street sending little zephyrs of snow scurrying along the gutters. Ralph bent his head against the onslaught of the white particles and crunched his way along the icy sidewalk. The bulk of his body caught the wind like a sail and hindered his already slow progress. An orange neon sign buzzed out the words "606 Club" and Ralph turned into the doorway.

The atmosphere of the bar nauseated him. The smell of stale liquor was everywhere, mingled with the raucous laughter of people toasting their Christmas cheer. The bar ran the full length of the room, and behind it at the far end a man was busily washing glasses. The bartender looked up from his customers and saw Ralph.

"Ralph, come on in."

"How are ya, Eddie?"

"Fine, fine," the bartender replied, at the same time pouring Ralph a shot of scotch. "How's the man with the golden basket? Still in the same business, boy?"

Ralph grunted.

"Still a blimp?"

"Sure," Ralph answered, "all the world bows before the fat man."

"The man with the marshmallow basket."

"That's right," Ralph said, smiling slightly.

"Tell everyone about your business," the bartender said.

"You tell them," replied Ralph. "Be my agent."

"This man has a gut like a pillow. I got to work for a living. You got to work for a living. Ralph here was born with a living. Watch this." He came out from behind the bar. "I got a good arm; I can rip a telephone book. Watch this."

He made a fist and swung, hitting Ralph full in the middle. "Peanuts," Ralph said. "Try me again."

The bartender swung. His fist made a dull noise against Ralph's body.

"Nothing. Take pills."

"You see that?" said the bartender. "That belly of his is one of the world's natural wonders."

"It takes on all comers," Ralph said. "And I'm open for business."

"He means it," said the bartender.

"Something different," Ralph added, "Buck a swing. fair enough, and if I yell, I'll buy you a drink."

"You'll get killed someday," said a customer.

"You'll go broke trying to do it. I get rich on guys trying to kill me."

"Hooray for the fat boy." A woman's voice came from the back of the room. "Three cheers for Superman." She came out of the dark toward the two men. She was big and ample, with her hair bleached white.

The man behind her was no more than five feet tall. He wore a padded suit that gave him a triangular shape. Ralph watched them approach. The girl was smiling, warmed by her drinks. Her escort watched her as if she were a stranger. He was waiting to see what she would do next. Ralph saw that the man was nervous. He was all wound up.

"Ladies' day," she said. "Mind if I play?"

"Go ahead," Ralph said nonchalantly.

"Thanks," she said. "You're fantastic. Where do I sock?"

"Over the belt and under the nose."

"Do I get bargain rates?" she asked.

"Have one on me," Ralph said.

"She pays," her escort said. "Here's a dollar."

Ralph took the dollar.

"Go ahead," her escort said.

"Don't rush me. This is a pleasure. I hate fat men." She hit at Ralph with the side of her hand. "Wonderful," she said.

"Like punching a cheese omelet," Ralph said.

"Here," said the short man, handing Ralph another one-dollar bill.

With an awkward fist she hit him in the chest. "He's a doll, a regular marshmallow man," she said. She kissed him on the cheek. "That's if I hurt you."

Her escort looked at Ralph's face. Ralph caught his eyes. He felt like running.

The woman swung at him in a flurry of short, wild punches. "I counted," the short man said. "Eight." He gave Ralph two tens.

"There's twenty," he said. "You owe her twelve."

"Sorry," said Ralph. "The store just closed." His mind raced and he longed to sit down.

"It's too early to close," the triangular-shaped man growled.

The woman swung twice more. Once she hit Ralph full in the face.

"Nine - ten," her escort said. "Ten more tries for the booby prize."

"No," Ralph stammered, "that's all for tonight." He held out ten. Droplets of perspiration dribbled from his chin. It was not from fear. He didn't know exactly what it was.

"Keep it," the man said. "We're not finished."

"No more. I don't feel good."

"More," the man said, "you'll feel better."

"I'm tired," moaned the woman. "I think I broke my hand."

"I'll finish for you," the triangle replied. "Would you like that?"

"Do what you want," she said. "He don't feel nothin'."

The man stepped up face to face with Ralph.

Ralph tightened himself.

"One," the man muttered. He swung, and the punch was hard against Ralph's body. "Two," he punched again for the same spot. "Three. Four." He hit for the same place under the heart.

Ralph felt himself pushed back. He flexed himself harder. Rage was rising within him.

"Five," the face said. "Six. Seven."

"Take it easy," the woman said.

"Eight," the man grunted. He swung again and the punch landed solid. Ralph tried to get away. The triangle kept swinging. He swung both hands in a windmill attack. He lost control.

"Please lay off," the woman screamed. "Leave him alone."

The small man swung like a robot, grunting with his effort.

Ralph felt himself losing vision. His brain turned. He was in the crowded bus again, being pushed back and forth. He was caught in a tortured dream.

Suddenly his bulk came alive. He moaned in a terrible moment of pain. He attacked his attacker, arms pounding at the small jabbing enemy.

"Oh, no," the woman screamed. "Stop. . .!"

Ralph pushed away the triangular-shaped bug that bothered him. His fists fell heavily against the small body. The object crumpled before him. He fell on it, punching, gouging, kicking. Far away voices converged on his mind, but he paid no attention. Everything was concentrated on violence. Then he felt nothing.

When Ralph awoke, he saw a man in a blue uniform bending over him. He closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. The policeman tried to talk to him.

"He's resting," the nurse said.

"He's awake," the policeman said. "I saw him move his eyes."

"Let him rest," the nurse repeated.

"I got to ask him questions. You know what he did to that guy."

"Ask him later,"

Ralph kept his eyes tightly closed. He didn't want to be annoyed. He had his leisure, and no one would interrupt his holiday. He felt safe and taken care of.

