

OCTOBER 1982

ALTERNATE REALITIES 5



RALPH ROBERTS
C. BRUCE HUNTER

BUTCH GÜICE
JAMES CASSARA

DEBTOR'S PRISON

Illustrated by Caria Schultheis

They almost got him that time. The black Mercedes had swerved onto the sidewalk thirty yards in front of Hadley, mowing a swath through pedestrians and parking meters with its cowcatcher. It was the sound of impact that alerted Hadley and sent him scurrying into a doorway just in time to avoid being impaled on the hood ornament. Hadley, of course, did not see the lettering on the door of the sedan. Hadley was quite blind.

It was illegal, not to mention unethical, for a collection agency to try to run down a delinquent client on a busy street in broad daylight, but small agencies were every day opening in abandoned gas stations or in seedy office buildings, and it was difficult for the authorities to keep track of them. It was wise for a man to avoid the fly-by-night establishments and to do business with the larger companies. Hadley knew this but was constantly in debt to two or three small businesses. Hadley had never been wise.

Hadley retrieved his cane and his shopping bag and hurried on his way before the limousines of the Better Business Bureau arrived to investigate. As he approached his apartment building, he could hear sirens in the distance.

There was a letter in Hadley's mailbox. It was thought-

fully written in braille. It read:

In case you've forgotten....
Your billing date is the fifth day of the month.
Please mail your payment today in the handy enclosed envelope. If your payment has already been sent, thank you and please disregard this notice.

Sincerely,
T. Gray
Credit Manager
Barney's Collection
Agency



Caria Schultheis

Hadley crumpled the letter and the handy envelope and threw them on the ground.

Hadley's wife had beaten him home by several minutes. She had come from the courthouse. "Fritz had his eye put out," she announced. "But he got his balance decreased twenty percent because of what the judge called 'unethical practices'."

"That's not a bad deal," commented Hadley, settling in to his favorite chair. "His fingers will heal. By the way--I was almost run down again. They were in a Mercedes."

Hadley's wife looked at him with her good eye. "How do you know it was a Mercedes?"

"It was a diesel. Barney's men are the only ones who drive Mercedes."

There was a knock at the door. It was safe to open it because regular business hours were over. The Chamber of Commerce did not take kindly to clients getting worked over after hours. The collection agencies heeded this rule because not one of them could match the Chamber's firepower.

There was a salesman at the door. He sold Hadley a seeing eye dog. Hadley had had a dog at one time, but it had been killed by the industrious employees of the Ace Collection Agency. The new dog was, of course, one of the more expensively-trained animals. And, of course, Hadley charged it. He used his left arm as collateral.

In bed that night, Hadley and his wife talked. "How did Fritz take it?"

"He wasn't happy. He thought he should have gotten forty percent off. He doesn't think he will ever be able to use his fingers again."

"I meant, how did he take the loss of his eye?"

"He screamed and raved. He even called the judge names. She was just trying to do her job."

"Some people will never grow up. I think losing this eye will teach him the value

of the other. It takes a little mutilation to make a youngster like that really settle down."

"I suppose so." Hadley's wife unbuckled her prosthetic leg and leaned it against the bed. "Good night," she said.

The next morning, over eggs and toast, Hadley's wife scanned the paper, but found only two or three bargains that would be worth checking in to. The phone rang three times before it was time for Hadley to leave for work. The first two times it was Barney's Collection Agency. The third time, it was Fritz. "I'm coming up. Hold on."

Hadley had no intention of holding on. He grabbed his hat. As he was leaving, he asked his wife, "I wonder what he wants."

"Probably to return your credit card," she called after the slammed door.

Fritz must have called from the lobby. He stepped out of the elevator as Hadley was pressing the down button, his face gaunt from lack of sleep, a makeshift patch over his left eye socket, bandages on his hands.

"Recognize this?" he asked Hadley. "I'm sure you can guess what it is. I'll give you a hint. It says on the back, 'In case of loss or theft, card holder shall be responsible for any misuse prior to notification of this company, such liability not to exceed four appendages or one eye'."

Hadley made a grab in the direction of Fritz' voice. "Oh, you can have it, Hadley. I'm quite through with it. But you can be sure I'll pay for what I charged, just as you were so prompt in making payments on the note you con-

vinced me to co-sign for you. The note that cost me my eye and two bunged-up hands."

"How much," croaked Hadley. "How much did you charge?"

"The limit," said Fritz, "both arms and both legs." He strode back into the waiting elevator and punched a button. Hadley stood there as the elevator door closed. He was still there when the door opened again and two of Barney's hired thugs stepped

out, brass knuckles ready. Regular business hours had begun. **♣**

Dallas Denny, of Smyrna, Tennessee, holds an MA degree and is licensed to practice psychology. He has published stories in Mockingbird and Cumberlands magazines. His first novel, The Eyes of Mankian, a fantasy, has been completed and he will be approaching publishers with it soon.

Each issue, Alternate Realities is proud to present a new word puzzle by Ralph Roberts.

The words may read forward, backward, down, up, or diagonally. The first solution -- a word list -- is on page 22. Don't peek!



PREANTEPENULTIMATE



This puzzle has the names of several authors whose work has appeared twice or more in ISAAC ASIMOV'S SF MAGAZINE. How many can you find?



**By
Ralph
Roberts
and his
Computer**

T	R	E	N	D	R	A	G	L	S	H	E	S
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