

fantastic

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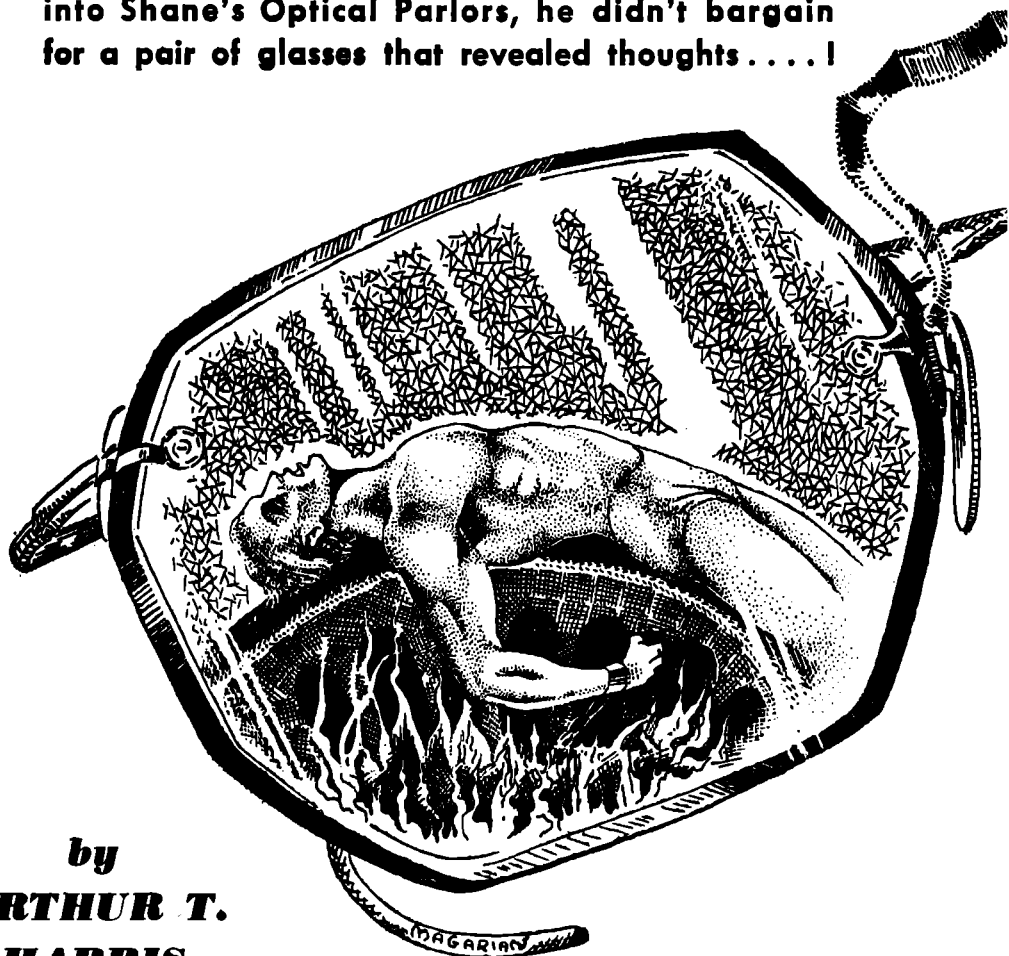
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VOLUME 3,
Number 5

ABNER SCHLAP'S

STRANGE INSIGHT

When Abner Schlap, mogul of Terminal City, went into Shane's Optical Parlors, he didn't bargain for a pair of glasses that revealed thoughts I



by
**ARTHUR T.
HARRIS**

WITH dreadful finality, Abner Schlap, the Terror of Terminal City, barged commandingly through the portals of Doc Shane's Optical Parlors.

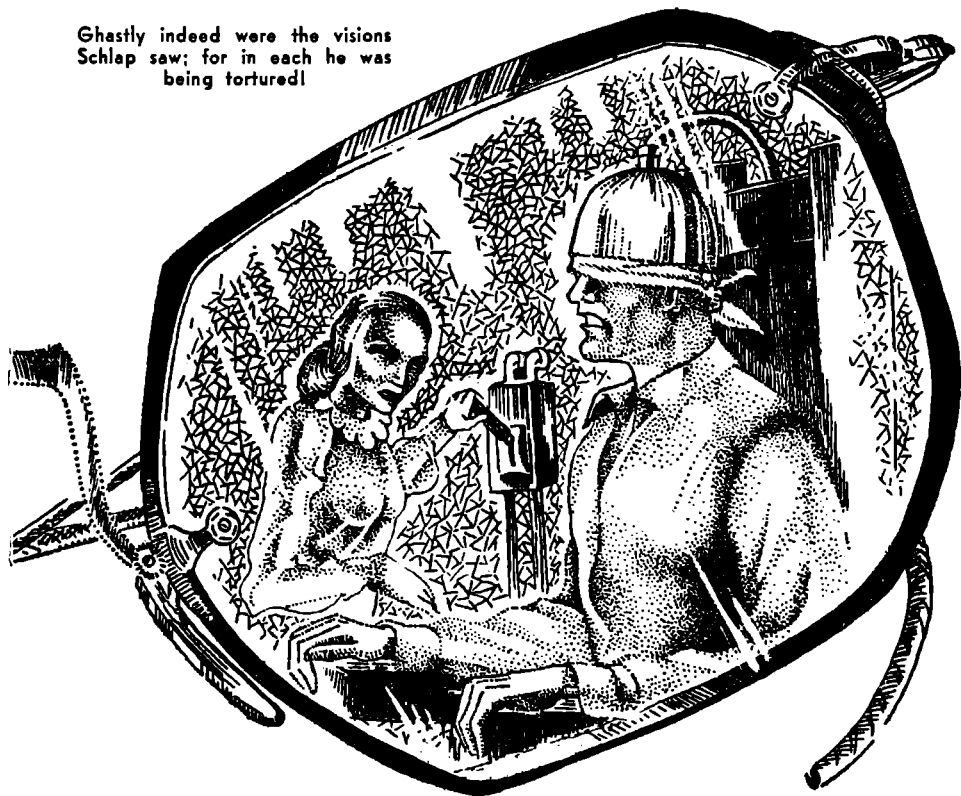
"I," announced Schlap with the voice of doom, "have come for my glasses."

Horace Heysead, Doc Shane's newly hired assistant, notched up his courage three and a half pegs and stammered,

"Oh, indeed? How nice of you to call on us, Major Schlap."

"Colonel Schlap!" thundered the proprietor of Terminal City, who had

Ghastly indeed were the visions
Schlap saw; for in each he was
being tortured!



once been a corporal in a boys' military school. "And I did not come to pay you a visit! I detest doctors and politicians—quacks, all of them! I might even detest you," he added ominously, "if you don't get me my glasses in a hurry."

"Oh, no, sir!" quavered Horace. "That would be awful! I'll see about your prescription at once. Dr. Shane is home, ill," he flung back over his shoulder as he scurried from the room.

"Ill, huh?" growled Abner Schlap. "I trust it's nothing trivial."

The frightened Horace was back in a few minutes with an attractively designed pair of spectacles. The lenses, as a timid beam of sunlight struck them, seemed for a moment to reflect an oddly phosphorescent glint, as though a rainbow had become imprisoned in a fortune-teller's crystal globe.

Schlap glared at the eyepiece suspiciously.

"This doesn't look like the frame I ordered," he snapped.

"Oh, but there must be some mistake!" Horace quivered. "These were laid out in Dr. Shane's special drawer for—er—important customers."

Schlap appeared slightly mollified.

"All right," he grunted. "I'll try 'em on."

For a man of such large and well-nigh formidable proportions, Schlap handled the glasses almost gingerly. He put them over his gimlet eyes. The spectacles hung awry; and with a simper of apology, Horace Heysead went to work.

"How is that, sir?" he asked after he had made one or two little adjustments.

"Uncomfortable!" Schlap snorted.

"Here, sir," Horace suggested, "watch my finger."

He moved the shaking member back and forth from the center of Schlap's nose. Schlap focused and unfocused his eyes blurrily, trying to follow the finger. Finally he impaled it with a dangerous glare. Yes—a man's finger, all right.

His eyes lifted abruptly to stare at the anxious Horace. And then Schlap started. He was looking directly into the eyes of Doc Shane's young assistant—and what he saw there was, to put it mildly, shocking.

Straight through the black pupils he looked—right through Horace's twitching eyeballs! But instead of seeing a collection of blood vessels, lymphatic veins and other unmentionable things, Abner Schlap beheld a miniature motion picture!

A motion picture, no less, of Horace Heysead's inner mental processes!

"Oh, God!" moaned Schlap piteously.

He closed his eyes weakly. But he couldn't get the dreadful vision out of them. He quaked like an aspen leaf, recalling the two characters in that hectic scene.

One of them had been Abner Schlap. He was stretched out on a rack, like a defenseless victim of the Inquisition. Only it was a 1941 rack. All aluminum, with sharp little spikes. On a bicycle-seat contraption had sat Horace Heysead. A wheel-and-sprocket gadget was attached to the rack.

Every time Schlap groaned, Horace made another gleeful turn of the pedal. Every time Schlap stopped groaning, Horace pushed a little switch, which sent sharp electric jolts through the sharper little spikes, on which Schlap was impaled.

Yes, indeed, it had all been perfectly frightful . . .

"Don't do it!" Schlap screamed. "I'll give you a half interest in my trolley company!"

Horace Heysead turned the color of salt.

"Can—can I get you a doctor?" he stammered hoarsely. "You seem a trifle upset."

"Upset!" screamed Abner Schlap horribly. "My God, man, I'm in a state of collapse!"

Tottering to his feet like a wounded moose, Schlap cast one more horrified look at the incredulous Horace Heysead and lurched fearfully to the street.

TEN minutes later, Abner Schlap sank like a stone into his office chair. He wiped his forehead with a big silk handkerchief. Then he pushed the first in a row of panel buttons.

Ten seconds later, a mouselike female fluttered like a dying hummingbird into the Great Man's sanctum.

"Miss Droope!" Schlap said anxiously. "Look into my eyes."

"Yes, sir," squeaked his long-suffering secretary. "Of course, sir."

Miss Droope, for all her beanpole figure, came of good stock. An ancient ancestor had come over on the *Mayflower*, or at any rate on a boat. The heritage of heroes flowered however nervously in the veins of Miss Belinda Droope.

But to Abner Schlap, that bloodstream was an icy torrent of murderous revenge.

"No!" he screamed. "You don't have to work Saturdays! I'll give you a raise! I'll—even—help—you—to—get—married! Only for God's sake, *don't torture me any more!*"

Miss Droope behaved quite normally. She let out an anguished howl and fled like a moth-eaten gazelle from her abject employer. She fled right out the door of Schlap's Golden Brewery

and down the main street to her room in Terminal City's oldest hotel. There Miss Droope buried her head in her bed covers and proceeded to shudder in tearful spasms.

Schlap also shuddered. For it was true, then. He didn't have the d.t.'s. Heaven forbid, although he was not in bad health, a *second* dreadful vision had come before him! Just the other day, his doctor had pronounced him sound. No; he, Abner Schlap, must be *bewitched* . . .

The movie had flashed on again. That dreadful mental movie, which undoubtedly came straight from the most secret recess of the human brain. The subconscious mind, perhaps.

But whatever it was, the scene had been virtually repeated—another torture episode. This time, instead of being spitted on an aluminum rack, Abner Schlap had been wound around the inside of an automobile clutch.

On all sides of the clutch was a magnificent roadster, and in the driver's seat, coyly depressing the clutch pedal, was Miss Belinda Droope.

The car was bowling gaily down a torn-up mountain road. Every time there was a particularly bad hole, Miss Droope let out the clutch and slowed the car. This meant that Abner Schlap was being alternately whirled on a flywheel and ground by friction into fat little bits.

It was, indeed, ghastly. It was even more disastrous when the Terror of Terminal City, coming to his senses, realized that Miss Droope had an incorrigible reputation as a gossip, and that before many hours he, Abner Schlap, would be known about town as a werewolf, a human cannibal and a man-made blitzkrieg.

AT the same time, further consternation was afoot.

Promptly at 10 a.m., a bare half hour after Colonel Schlap had begun the first of his morning trials, Professor Engelbert Snipe weaved lankily through the aforementioned portals of Doc Shane's Optical Parlors.

"Good morning!" he announced cheerily.

Horace Heysead, who had been scanning his favorite muscle-building magazine, while shivering every other moment at the *Affaire Schlap*, thrust the literary tonic behind the counter guiltily.

"Er—hello. I mean, good morning," he stammered. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"My good man," said Professor Snipe, "you can give me a new aspect on life. In fact, a most interesting aspect," he added with a sudden twinge of conscience. "Dr. Shane, I presume, has my prescription ready. The name is Snipe."

Horace's blue eyes widened.

"Oh, Professor Snipe! Yes, indeed. It was a special order, I believe. I'll be right out."

This, it must be admitted, was a white lie; for Horace did not return for a full fifteen minutes. And when he did, it was evident that he had been through the tortures of the damned.

"Professor Snipe," he quavered weakly, "I have made a dreadful mistake. I—I think I have mislaid your lenses. They just aren't anywhere around. But I'm sure we'll have them for you in the morning."

Snipe looked instantly startled.

"But you mustn't lose them!" he screeched. "They're very valuable. I've spent two solid years on the prescription for those glasses. If anything should happen to them— Oh dear, if someone else should get them by mistake! But of course that's impossible."

"Yes, sir," Horace nodded, ghastly

pale and in a complete fog. "Impossible . . ."

A frightened look came over Professor Snipe's face.

"My research—I mean, I shouldn't like to have it known just yet about my experiments—that is, if it is all right with you, young man—"

"Oh quite, quite!" Horace gushed with gales of relief. "Not a soul shall hear of this. Not even Dr. Shane," he added in a still small voice.

"Very well," breathed Professor Snipe. "I mean, it could be much worse—really, it could." And like the last rose of summer, he wilted wanly out the door.

Down the street he jolted, to the Miller House, the aforesaid ancient hostelry of Terminal City. Lurching corpse-like up the rickety stairs, the professor let himself into his room—next door to that of Miss Belinda Droope's—which resembled nothing so much as the laboratory of a frustrated genius.

Prisms, charts, mathematical calculators, old boxes, scads of notepaper and several impossible-looking appliances littered this alchemist's den. The professor did not even glance at his precious apparatus.

Instead, looking over his shoulder at least twice, he stole across the threadbare carpet to his dresser, brought forth a nearly full bottle of Bourbon, raised the opening to his bluish lips and began a long and nervous gurgle . . .

Meanwhile, several blocks away, Horace Heysead, having scampered aimlessly about the optical store's workroom, had at last come to the terrifying conclusion that he had given Professor Snipe's glasses to none other than Abner Schlap!

BEING a stalwart but unimaginative soul, Schlap never for a moment

questioned the mysterious properties of his new spectacles.

He had never worn glasses in his life. Yet the mere correction of one's vision surely did not conjure up a host of horrid hallucinations.

Just to be on the safe side, however, Schlap, squirming uncomfortably in his swivel chair, removed the glasses and leered at them with a jaundiced eye.

Hell, no. Glasses they were, and glasses they could not be anything else but. Besides, although the frame fit a bit snugly over his beetle-browed face, the lenses definitely improved his vision.

Snorting belligerently, Abner Schlap slapped the new cheaters back across his ears. Tommyrot, that's what it was; tommyrot! He'd been working too hard lately. Now that he recalled it, the doctor *had* said something about "nervous strain."

That was it. Lot of responsibility, running a whole town. Too much on his mind, Schlap decided. No wonder he'd been seeing things. All great men of affairs have to let down their hair occasionally. Even Napoleon had his lighter moments . . .

Feeling reassured and almost smug again, Schlap heaved himself to his feet, intending to drive out to his club for a round of golf and a few locker-room highballs.

Never was a holiday more cruelly interrupted. As Abner Schlap reached his office door, there was suddenly a great ringing of gongs, a flashing of red lights, and the hiss of sprinkler systems spurting away on a rampage.

"Fire!" someone yelled.

"Sabotage!" came a confirming shout.

"The Nazis have landed!" a frightened female yelled.

Into the midst of all this chaos stormed Abner Schlap. He sniffed the

air suspiciously.

"Who started that damned rumor about fire—" he began.

Further bombast was unnecessary. With an earth-quaking roar, a boiler blew up, scattering three floors and a large section of the roof.

"Who," roared Abner Schlap, "is responsible for this time-bomb?"

No coward, he began herding scared employees toward the exit. When he finally reached the street himself, flames had enveloped Schlap's Golden Brewery with a vengeance.

Casting his eye angrily down the street, Schlap was just in time to see the Terminal City Fire Department, late as usual, come clanging to the rescue.

SEVERAL blocks away, Professor Snipe was rapidly becoming befuddled.

He had taken his swig of whiskey, returned the bottle to the dresser, dutifully washed out his mouth with cold water—and then, on second, third and fourth thoughts, had gone back for more little snifters.

"I am a ruined man," groaned the professor. "I shall drown my disgrace in forbidden spirits. If someone has made off with my precious lenses, the greatest discovery since Adam created Eve will be broadcast wholesale to a cruel and undeserving world!"

Unhappily the professor slumped in his old Morris chair. For two long years, he had labored in solitary grandeur in these proud but poverty-breathing surroundings. He had permitted nothing to distract him—not even the skinny but hopeful Belinda Droope, who had cast him many coy and admiring glances when they'd met in the hallway from time to time.

If the truth be known, the ultra-shy Professor Snipe, walrus mustaches and

all, had long harbored reciprocal sentiments in regard to Miss Droope. To put it bluntly, he hoped one day to offer her his hand—once his magnificent brainchild had come to life in a shower of golden coins.

For the thing was indubitably magnificent. It was, to be specific, the greatest advance in optics since Galileo had invented the telescope.

With these wondrous lenses, easily fitted into ordinary spectacle frames, anyone could look into the eyes of another—and read his every thought.

Not having the necessary grinding apparatus, Snipe had had to entrust his priceless prescription to Doc Shane's Optical Parlors.

The professor had first got the basic idea from his knowledge of brain-waves. The eye, he knew, is connected to the brain through the optic nerve, which transmits images recorded on the retina through the pupil.

Therefore, since it follows that brain and eye cooperate mutually, it must also be true, Professor Snipe reasoned, that thought-impulses—in particular, ideas generated by the subconscious mind—are themselves reflected back*

* Think of two mirrors. Place a lighted candle between them. Light rays will be reflected back and forth, from one mirror to the other. Similarly, then, there is no reason to suppose that the retina of the human eye is not a motion picture "screen." On this screen, thoughts are projected from the brain; if they could be read accurately, even a man with a "poker face" could not hide his inner emotions.

We speak of a man who "sees red." Actually, he isn't seeing anything visually, but his brain is seething with anger or indignation. That emotion is instantaneously conveyed back along the optic nerve and "screened" on the retina.

If we watch the fellow closely, we can detect the angry glint in his eye. We cannot tell just what action he is planning, because we do not have the proper apparatus to interpret his thoughts. We only know he is in a rage.

Therefore, in designing his precious lenses, Professor Engelbert Snipe knew that the secret formula which they contained would enable anyone to read another's mind.—Ed.

on the retina, the thought being conveyed through the regular eye-brain channel: the optic nerve.

But now, Snipe told himself between hiccups, all was lost, all. In his alcoholic miasma, strange visions began to cloud his weary brain.

From afar he heard the peal of an organ. Nearer it grew, nearer. Wonder of wonders! He, Engelbert Snipe, was suddenly in church. Not only in church, but draped on his skinny arm was the emaciated but happily smirking Belinda Droope.

Like two animated skeletons, the bridal pair proceeded awkwardly down the center aisle. They came at last to the altar. There was a man standing there, severely clothed in what might or might not have been ministerial vestments.

Oh God, Professor Snipe groaned, as Belinda shook in sympathetic panic, this was no minister. This was Colonel Abner Schlapp, the man who single-handed practically ran the miniature metropolis of Terminal City.

Schlapp stood there formidably; and then he began to read from an ominous little black book.

"I, Privy Councilor to His Majesty, King Satan of Hell," Schlapp began, "do hereby forbid this marriage—"

WITH a shrill scream, Professor Snipe woke up. A loud explosion reverberated thunderously in his ears. Snipe shuddered, as spilled whiskey fumed up from the overturned bottle of Bourbon.

He looked around, to find his arm entangled with a dust mop.

"Oh dear Lord," he moaned, staring at the mop. "And I thought you were Miss Belinda Droope! That's what I get for drinking. I'm just a will-o'-the-wisp, a ne'er-do-well, a soldier of fortune in the Army of Sin—"

Sounds of the ever-late Fire Department came clangorously from the street. Getting groggily to his feet, Snipe weaved to the window and stared out.

"My stars!" he muttered. "It's the Schlapp brewery, and— Oh precious saints!" the professor yelped. "Miss Belinda Droope works there!"

With a spasmodic gulp, Engelbert Snipe fairly flew out of the hotel, his funereal black suit flapping disrespectfully on his bones.

Had he glanced back, he might have seen the gaunt and excited figure of Miss Belinda Droope; who, having bolted for home but a few minutes before, was still shaking in righteous terror, after her sad episode with her employer, when the Schlapp boiler blew up.

Yards behind the agitated professor came Miss Droope, afraid that her very job was going up in flames. And behind Miss Droope came half the town, eager to see the fun.

TO Abner Schlapp, it was anything but a carnival.

"My brewery!" he stormed. "I've got insurance, but it's the principle of the thing! Enemy agents are behind this! I shall wire the Senate to declare war—"

He espied the approaching form of Chief Creepers, head of the Fire Department. Schlapp descended on the unfortunate fellow like all the seven furies.

"Creepers!" he snarled. "You're late again! My lovely brewery will burn to ashes and—"

Involuntarily Schlapp glared at the unhappy official. Glared straight into his eyes. Glared, and then shrank back, mumbling in abject terror and beginning to drool at the mouth.

It was horrible. It was ghastly. Worse, it was the truth! Outwardly,

the bodily proportions of Chief Creepers were trembling with fear. But inwardly—inwardly, in the secret recess of his much-abused soul, the doughty fire-fighter was seething like a four-alarm volcano.

Looking into his ordinarily mild blue eyes, Abner Schlap beheld a scene of utter horror. There was, he saw all too clearly, a handball court. At one end of the court, a heavy fat man wearing bathing trunks stood with his back to the wall.

In the center of the wall was a little door, just big enough to squeeze through. From every part of the door-frame protruded—razor-edged knives.

Facing the frantic victim stood a middle-aged, athletic man wearing asbestos gloves. Every ten seconds, he would reach down into a brazier full of blazing live coals and palm one in his hand.

Swish! With unerring accuracy, the live coal would head for the quivering body of the unprotected fat man. Always it would land, to sizzle on the bare flesh like steak on an open griddle.

And if the victim tried frantically to escape—there was only that narrow spiked doorway to go through.

The athlete, of course, was Chief Creepers, of the Fire Department. And the victim, scorched as a barbecued ham, was none other than Colonel Abner Schlap, the titan of Terminal City . . .

Sweating from every pore, Schlap backed away from the astounded Creepers, as hundreds of townsfolk gaped on the sidewalk.

"Mercy!" bleated Schlap. "I'll give you everything I own—I mean, ten percent! I—I take back all the nasty things I've called you! I'll see the city gives you a gold medal of honor! I'll—"

"He's gone nuts!" several onlookers

muttered simultaneously.

"Schlap is slap-happy!" observed a local pugilist.

"The Great Brain has collapsed!" cynically opined the editor of the Terminal City *Banner*, who had just arrived.

FOR Chief Creepers, it was even worse. For twenty years, Abner Schlap had presented himself at each and every fire. As the town's largest property owner, Schlap had always insisted on taking personal charge of the city's fire apparatus.

Therefore, Chief Creepers was now in a terrible pickle. It had been so long since he'd fought a fire on his own, he hardly knew what orders to give. Meanwhile, some twenty-five firemen stood around dazedly, waiting for the strident Schlap commands which never came.

As if in united accord, firemen and onlookers turned beseechingly toward Abner Schlap. The Terror of Terminal City returned their pleading stares with frightened eyes. His mouth continued to drool.

"Leave me alone, you nasty people!" he cried. "You're torturers, that's what you are—gangsters! Now go away and let me die in agony—I mean, in peace!"

This dreadful stalemate might have kept on until the Schlap brewery, and several other fine buildings adjoining, had burned to the ground, causing irreplaceable damage and the jobs of many hundreds, had Belinda Droope not arrived on the scene, to be followed like a lunging panther by Professor Engelbert Snipe.

"Mr. Schlap!" screamed Belinda Droope, courage mounting from her birdlike soul. "Your competitors are trying to ruin you! Snap into it, Mr. Schlap, and put out this fire! Snap

into it, Mr. Schlap!" she pleaded.

A split instant later, Professor Snipe skidded to a frantic halt. He misjudged the situation at a glance. He saw the cringing Abner Schlap, the excited, anxious, imploring Miss Droope, egging her boss on to direct action.

Snipe, of course, misinterpreted the whole scene.

"Abner Schlap!" he bellowed through his squeaky vocal cords. "Abner Schlap, you do NOT own this town! You will NOT let it burn to the ground! You will NOT drive Miss Belinda Droope to the brink of madness—and furthermore, sir, you will NOT prevent our marriage! I mean—"

"Let me alone!" shrieked Schlap, backing away hysterically from the angrily advancing professor. "Stop *persecuting* me!"

So saying, he made a frantic swipe with his arm. It brushed Snipe aside like a wind-swept willow. Snorting defiance, Snipe charged back into the fray like a spitting wildcat. He kicked, he screeched, and he made a wild scratching jab with his hand.

The scrawny fingers collided with Schlap's glasses. They knocked the spectacles off the Schlap face. Ten feet, the unoffending eyepiece flew, to land in a million little bits on the sidewalk.

This was too much for Abner Schlap.

"You big brute!" he roared. "Kick a helpless man when he's down,"

He made straight for Professor Snipe. Snipe stood his ground courageously, knotting his small fists like two doorknobs in a doll's house. When the two men were only inches apart, Schlap glared bitterly, involuntarily into the other's eyes.

Then he started. His mouth flew open, and his own eyes read incredulously into the depths of his persecutor's soul.

There was no malice in the eyes of Engelbert Snipe. Anger, yes, but no hatred, no spirit of horrid revenge. Snipe was just like any other man who thinks he has been wronged.

More important, in his bright, defiant gray eyes was no vision of unutterable torture upon the prostrate body of Abner Schlap!

"HALLELUJAH!" Schlap yelped joyously. "I'm a free man! I haven't got the heeby-jeebies any more! Nobody's persecuting me—"

He realized then what he was saying; realized, too, that everybody for yards around thought him quite mad.

"Creepers!" roared Abner Schlap, once more the captain of his soul.

"Yes, sir," bleated the happy fire chief, recognizing his master's return to sanity.

"Creepers," commanded the rejuvenated Terror of Terminal City, "take this man"—he pointed to the still angry Snipe—"out of my sight. I will deal with him later. Apparently he has a grievance. I, Abner Schlap, deny justice to no man. Now, then, put out this fire!"

"Absolutely, sir!" nodded the overjoyed fire-fighter. "The usual way, sir?"

"The usual way," Schlap gestured imperiously. "Schlap methods have never failed."

Moments later, Abner Schlap was reminded of this axiom when he felt an anxious hand of his arm.

"Yes?" he rumbled deeply, turning. "Oh—Miss Droope. No, don't look so worried, Miss Droope. Everything is quite under control."

"But that gentleman over there—" Miss Belinda Droope blushed furiously as Schlap's eye followed her distraught gaze to the gaunt figure of Professor Engelbert Snipe, now engaged in strug-

gling futilely with a burly fireman.

"Oh." Schlap stared at him long and hard, seeming to recall that the two had once met. In fact, he seemed to recall quite a bit.

"Well, what about that human scarecrow, Miss Droope?"

"Oh, but he's not!" she protested anxiously. "I mean, that's the man who spoke up to you and brought you to your senses, and—"

"Enough!" commanded Abner Schlap in his most dignified manner. "As I understand it, Miss Droope, you are concerned about that—er—gentleman. You wish to have him released?"

"Oh, Mr. Schlap!" cooed the breathless Belinda Droope.

Promptly the order was given. A moment later, a thin and still flustered

man, in flapping black clothes, and an even thinner but radiantly blushing beanpole of a woman, could be seen making their way together down the street.

"Oh, Professor Snipe!" Belinda Droope gushed. "I'm so glad I happened along to rescue you from—er—from all that trouble! You know, Colonel Schlap really isn't such a bad person. It's just—well, sometimes I think he has the wrong aspect on life. You know—as if he were looking at things through the wrong pair of glasses."

"My dear," responded the professor, still wondering fearfully what would have happened had anyone, so he thought, found his precious lenses, "my dear, let's not even think of such things."
