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The Crackpots

By Harlan Ellison



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He was standing on a street corner, wearing a long orange nightgown and a red slumber-cap with a tassel. He was studiously picking his nose.

"Watch him!" cried Furth. "Watch what he does! Get the technique accurately!"

For this I studied four years to become an expert? thought Themus.

Furth looked at the younger man for the first time in several minutes. "Are you watching him?" The elder Watcher nudged his companion, causing Themus's dictobox to bump unceremoniously against his chest.

"Yes, yes, I'm watching," answered Themus, "but what possible reason could there be to watch a lunatic picking his nose on a public street corner?" Annoyance rang in his voice.

Furth swung on him, his eyes cold steel. "You *watch* them, that's your job. And don't ever forget that! And dictate it into that box strapped to your stupid shoulders. If I ever catch you failing to notice and dictate

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what they're doing, I'll have you shipped back to Central and then into the Mines. You understand what I'm saying?"

Themus nodded dumbly, the attack having shocked and surprised him, so sudden and intensive was it.

He watched the Crackpot.

His stomach felt uneasy. His voice quavered as he described in minute detail, as he had been taught, the procedure. It made his nose itch. He ignored it. Soon the Crackpot gave a little laugh, did a small dance step, and skipped out of sight across the street and around the corner.

Themus spoke into the Communicator Attachment on his box: "Watcher, sector seventy, here. Male, orange nightgown, red slumber-cap, coming your way. Pick him up, sixty-nine. He's all yours. Over."

An acknowledging buzz came from the Attachment, Themus said, "Out here," and turned the Attachment off.

Furth, who had been dictating the detailed tying of a can on the tail of a four-legged Kyben dog by a tall, bald Crackpot, concluded his report as the dog ran off barking wildly, muttered, "Off," into the dicto-box and

turned once more to Themus. The younger Watcher tightened inside.
Here it comes.

Unexpectedly, the senior Watcher's voice was quiet, almost gentle.
"Come with me, Themus, I want to talk with you."

They strode through the street of Valasah, capital of Kyba, watching the other branch of Kyben. The native Kyben, those who put light-tubes in their mouths and twisted their ears in expectation of fluorescence, those who pulled their teeth with adjusto-wrenches, those who sat and scribbled odd messages on the sidewalks, called the armor-dressed Kyben "Stuffed-Shirts." The governing Kyben, those with the armor and high-crested metal helmets bearing the proud emblem of the eye-and-eagle, called their charges "Crackpots."

They were both Kyben.

There was a vast difference.

Furth was about to delineate the difference to his new aide. The senior Watcher's great-cape swirled in a rain of black as he turned into the Pub-crawler.

At a table near the front, Furth pulled his cape about his thighs and sat down, motioning Themus to the other chair.

The waiter walked slowly over to them, yawning behind his hand. Furth dictated the fact briefly. The waiter gave a high-pitched maniacal laugh. Themus felt his blood chill. These people were all mad, absolutely mad.

"Two glasses of *greth*," Furth said.

The waiter left. Furth recorded the fact. The waiter had kicked him before he had gone behind the bar.

When the drinks arrived, Furth took a long pull from the helix-shaped glass, slumped back, folded his hands on the table and said, "What did you learn at Academy-Central?"

The question took Themus by surprise. "Wh-what do you mean? I learned a great many things."

"Such as? Tell me."

"Well, there was primary snooping, both conscious and subconscious evaluation, reportage—four full years of it—shorthand, applied dictology, history, manners, customs, authority evaluation, mechanics, fact assemblage..."

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He found the subjects leaping to the front of his mind, tumbling from his lips. He had been second in his class of twelve hundred, and it had all stuck.

Furth cut him off with a wave of his hand. "Let's take that history. Capsule it for me."

Furth was a big man, eyes oddly set far back in hollows above deep yellow cheeks, hair white about the temples, a lean and electric man, the type who radiates energy even when asleep. Themus suspected this was his superior's way of testing him. He recited:

"The Corps is dedicated to gathering data. It will Watch and detect, assimilate and file. Nothing will escape the gaze of the Watcher. As the eagle soars, so the eye of the Watcher will fly to all things."

"God, *no*, man, I mean the *History*! The *History*." The elder Watcher precision-tapped his fingers one after another in irritation. "What is the story of the Kyben. Of Kyba itself. Of your job here. What is our relation to these?"

He waved his hand, taking in the bar, the people in the streets, the entire planet and its twin suns blazing yellow in the afternoon sky.

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Themus licked his thin lips, "The Kyben rule the Galaxy—is that what you want?" He breathed easier as the older man nodded. He continued, by rote: "The Kyben rule the Galaxy. They are the organizers. All other races realize the superior reasoning and administrative powers of the Kyben, and thus allow the Kyben to rule the Galaxy."

He stopped, biting his lower lip. "With your permission, Superior, can I do this some other way? Back at Academy-Central memorization was required, even on Penares it seemed apropos, but somehow—*here*—it sounds foolish to me. No disrespect intended, you understand, I'd just like to ramble it off quickly. I gather all you want are the basics."

The older man nodded his head for Themus to continue in any fashion he chose.

"We are a power, and all the others are too scared of us to try usurping because we run it all better than any ten of them could, and the only trouble is with the Earthmen and the Mawson Confederation, with whom we are negotiating right now. The only thing we have against us is this planet of black sheep relatives. They happen to be our people, but we left them some eleven hundred years ago because they were a pain in the

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neck and the Kyben realized they had a universe to conquer, and we wish we could get rid of them, because they're all quite mad, and if anyone finds out about them, we'll lose prestige, and besides they're a nuisance."

He found himself out of breath after the long string of phrases, and he stopped for a second. "There isn't a sane person on this planet, which isn't strange because all the 4-Fs were left when our ancestors took to space. In the eleven hundred years we've been running the Galaxy, these Crackpots have created a culture of imbecility for themselves. The Watcher garrison is maintained to make sure the lunatics don't escape and damage our position with the other worlds around us.

"If you have a black sheep relative, either you put him away under surveillance so he can't bother you, or you have him exterminated. Since we aren't barbarians like the Earthmen, we keep the madmen here, and watch them full time."

He stopped, realizing he had covered the subject quite well, and because he saw the sour expression on Furth's face.

"That's what they taught you at Academy-Central?" asked the senior Watcher.

"That's about it, except that Watcher units are all over the Galaxy, from Penares to Kyba, from the home planet to our farthest holding, doing a job for which they were trained and which no other order could do. Performing an invaluable service to all Kyben, from Kyben-Central outward to the edges of our exploration."

"Then don't you ever forget it, hear?" snapped Furth, leaning quickly across to the younger man. "Don't you ever let it slip out of your mind. If anything happens while you're awake and on the scene, and you miss it, no matter how insignificant, you'll wind up in the Mines." As if to illustrate his point, he clicked the dicto-box to "on" and spoke briefly into it, keeping his eyes on a girl neatly pouring the contents of a row of glasses on the bar's floor and eating the glasses, all but the stems, which she left lying in an orderly pile.

He concluded, and leaned back toward Themus, pointing a stubby finger. "You've got a soft job here, boy. Ten years as a Watcher and you can retire. Back to a nice cozy apartment in a Project at Kyben-Central or any other planet you choose, with anyone you choose, doing anything you choose—within the bounds of the Covenant, of course. You're lucky

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you made it into the Corps. Many a mother's son would *give* his mother to be where you are."

He lifted the helix-glass to his lips and drained it.

Themus sat, scratched his nose, and watched the purple liquid disappear.

It was his first day on Kyba, his Superior had straightened him out, he knew his place, he knew his job. Everything was clean and top-notch.

Somehow he was miserable.

* * * *

Themus looked at himself. At himself as he knew he was, not as he thought he was. This was a time for realities, not for wishful thinking.

He was twenty-three, average height, blue hair, blue eyes, light complexion—just a bit lighter than the average gold-color of his people—superior intelligence, and with the rigid, logical mind of his kind. He was an accepted Underclass member of the Watcher Corps with a year of intern work at Penares-Base and an immediate promotion to Kyba, which was acknowledged the soft spot before retirement. For a man as new to

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the Corps as Themus's five years made him, this was a remarkable thing, and explainable only by his quick and brilliant dictographic background.

He was a free man, a quick man with a dicto-box, a good-looking man, and, unfortunately, an unhappy man.

He was confused by it all.

His summation of himself was suddenly shattered by the rest of his squad's entrance into the common-room, voices pitched on a dozen different levels.

They came through the sliding doors, jostling and joking with one another, all tall and straight, all handsome and intelligent.

"You should have seen the one I got yesterday," said one man, zipping up his chest-armor. "He was sitting in the Dog's-Skull—you know, that little place on the corner of Bremen and Gabrett—with a bowl of noodle soup in front of him, tying the things together." The rest of the speaker's small group laughed uproariously. "When I asked him what he was doing,

he said, 'I'm a noodle-knitter, stupid.' *He* called *me* stupid! A noodle-knitter!" He elbowed the Underclassman next to him in the ribs and they both roared with laughter.

Across the room, strapping his dicto-box to his chest, one of the elder Underclassmen was studiously holding court.

"The worst ones are the psychos, gentlemen. I assure you, from six years' service here, that they take every prize ever invented. They are destructive, confusing, and elaborate to record. I recall one who was stacking *juba*-fruits in a huge pyramid in front of the library on Hemmorth Court. I watched him for seven hours, then suddenly he leaped up, bellowing, kicking the whole thing over, threw himself through a shop-front, attacked a woman shopping in the store, and finally came to rest exhausted in the gutter. It was a twenty-eight minute record, and I assure you it stretched my ability to quick-dictate. If he had..."

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Themus lost the train of the fellow's description. The talks were going on all over the common-room as the squad prepared to go out. His was one of three hundred such squads, all over the city, shifted every four hours of the thirty-two-hour day so there was no section of the city left untended. Few, if any, things escaped the notice of the Watcher Corps.

He pulled on his soft-soled jump-boots, buckled his dicto-box about him, and moved into the briefing room for instructions.

The rows of seats were fast filling up, and Themus hurried down the aisle.

Furth, dressed in an off-duty suit of plastic body armor with elaborate scrollwork embossed on it, and the traditional black great-cape, was seated with legs neatly crossed at the front of the room, on a slightly raised podium.

Themus took a seat next to the Watcher named Elix, one who had been chortling over an escapade with a pretty female Crackpot. Themus found himself looking at the other as though he were a mirror image. *Odd how*

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so many of us look alike, he thought. Then he caught himself. It was a ridiculous thought, and an incorrect one, of course. It was not that they looked alike, it was merely that the Kyben had found for themselves a central line, a median, to which they conformed. It was so much more logical and rewarding that way. If your brother looks and acts as you do, you can predict him. If you can predict him, efficiency will follow.

Only these Crackpots defied prediction. Madmen!

"There are two current items on our order of business today, gentlemen," Furth announced, rising.

Note pads and styli appeared as though by magic, but Furth shook his head and indicated they were not needed.

"No, these aren't memoranda, gentlemen. The first is a problem of discipline. The second is an alert." There was a restless murmur in the room, and Themus glanced around to see uneasiness on many faces. What could it be?

"The problem of discipline is simply—" he pointed at Elix seated beside Themus, "—such of your Underclassmen as Watcher Elix."

Elix rose to attention.

"Pack your gear, Watcher Elix, you leave for Kyben-Central this afternoon."

Themus noted with fascination that the Watcher's face turned a shade paler.

"M-may I ask why, Superior Furth?" Elix gasped out, maintaining Corps protocol even through his panic.

"Yes, yes, of course," replied Furth in a casual, matter-of-fact manner.

"You were on the scene of an orgy in the Hagars Building yesterday during second-shift, were you not?"

Elix swallowed with difficulty and nodded yes, then catching himself he said, "Yes, Superior Furth."

"How much of that orgy did you record?"

"As much as I could before it broke up, sir."

"What you mean is, as much as you could before you found that fondling a young woman named Guzbee was more interesting than your on-duty job. Correct?"

"She—she just *talked* to me for a short time, Superior; I recorded the entire affair. It was—"

"*Out!*" Furth pointed toward the door to the common-room. Elix slumped visibly, turned out of the row, walked up the aisle, and out of the briefing-room.

"And let that be an indication, gentlemen, that we will tolerate no activities with these people, be they Kyben or not. We are here to watch, and there are enough female Watchers and Central personnel so that any desires that may be aroused in you may be quenched without recourse to our wards. Is that quite clear, gentlemen?"

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He did not wait for an answer. They knew it was clear, and he knew it was clear. The message had been transmitted in the most readily understood manner.

"Now to the other business at hand," continued Furth. "We are currently looking for a man named Boolbak who, we are told, pinches steel. I have no explanation of this description, gentlemen, merely that he 'pinches steel.'

"I can tell you that he has a big, bushy white beard, what they call twinkling eyes, a puffy-cheeked face and a scar across his forehead from temple to temple. He weighs something between 190 and 200 pounds, fat and short, and always dresses in a red jacket and knickers with white fur on them.

"If you see this man, you are to follow him, dictograph him completely—*completely*, do you understand?—and not lose sight of him unless you are relieved by at least ten other Watchers. Is that clear?"

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Again he did not wait for an answer, but snapped his fingers casually, indicating the daily briefing was over.

Themus rose with the other thirty-eight Watchers and began to leave the room. There was a uniform look on all their faces; they all had the picture of Elix behind their eyes. Themus began to edge out of his row. He started when Furth called to him.

"Oh, Watcher Themus, I'd like a word with you."

Furth was a strange man, in many ways. He did not fit Themus's picture of a Superior, from previous experience with them, and, still bewildered by the abrupt fate assigned Elix, he found himself looking on his Superior with a mixture of awe, incredulity, hatred and fear.

"I hope the—uh—little lesson you saw today will not upset you. It was a harsh measure, to be sure, but it was the only way to get the point across."

Themus knew precisely what the Superior Watcher meant, for he had been taught from youth that this was the way matters should be handled. He also knew what he felt, but he was Kyben, and Kyben know their place.

Furth looked at him for a long moment, then pulled the black sheen that was his cloak closer about him. "I have you slated for big things here, Themus. We will have a post open for a new Junior Watcher in another six to eight months, and your record indicates you're a strong possibility."

Themus was shocked at the familiarity in both conversation protocol and exposition of Corps business, but he kept the astonishment from showing on his face.

"So I want you to keep an eye open here in Valasah," continued Furth. "There are a number of—well—irregularities we want to put a stop to."

"What sort of irregularities, Superior?" The Superior's familiarities had caused a corresponding ease to settle over the Underclassman.

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"For one, this fraternization—oh, strictly on an 'occupying troops' level, to be sure, but still a deviation from the norm—and another is that we've had a number of men leave the Corps."

"You mean sent home or—like Watcher Elix?"

The Superior squirmed visibly. "Well, no, not exactly. What I mean is, they've—you might say disappeared."

Themus's eyes opened wider in surprise. "Disappeared? That indicates free choice."

The roles of Superior and Underclassman seemed for the moment to have been transposed, as Furth tried to explain to the new Watcher.

"They've just gone. That's all. We can't find any trace of them. We suspect the Crackpots have been up to tricks more annoying than usual."

He suddenly stopped, realizing he had lowered himself by explaining to a lesser, and drew himself erect.

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"But then, there's always been a certain percentage of loss here. Unusual, but not too unusual. This *is* a mad world, don't forget."

Themus nodded.

"But then, to compensate, there are a certain number of Crackpots who want to leave their insane people, also. We take off a good three hundred every year; people with the proper Kyben mind, the kind who can snap into a problem and solve it in no time. Good, logical thinkers. The administrative type. You know."

"I see, sir," said Themus, not at all understanding.

He was becoming more and more lost in trying to fathom his Superior.

The elder Watcher seemed to sense a change in the Underclassman's attitude, for once again he became brusque, realizing he had overstepped himself.

"Well, accurate snooping, to you. Good rounds!"

Themus snapped a brisk salute at the Superior and left quickly.

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* * * *

His beat that day was the Seventh Sector, a twelve-block coverage with five fellow Watchers, their rounds overlapping. It was a route from the docks to the minaret-village. From the stock-pens near the Golwal Institute to the pueblo-city.

Valasah, like all cities on Kyba, was a wild mélange of disorder. Airy, fragile towers of transparent plastic rose spiraling next to squat quonset-buildings. Teepees hunkered down next to buildings, of multi-dimensional eccentricity, whose arms twisted in on themselves till the eye lost the track of their form.

Streets twisted and suddenly opened onto others. Many stopped dead as though their builders had tired of the effort of continuing. Large empty lots stood next to stores in which customers fought to get at the merchandise.

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The people strutted, capered, hobbled, marched and walked backward on both hands and feet through the streets, in the stores, across the tops of a hundred different styles of transportation.

Themus snapped his dicto-box on and spoke, "Record," into it. Then he walked slowly down one street, up the next, into an office building, through doors, past knots of people, dictating anything and everything. Occasionally he would see a fellow Watcher and they would exchange salutes, eyes never leaving their wards.

The Crackpots seemed oblivious to his presence. No conversation would slow or halt at his approach, no one would move from his path, all seemed to accept him somehow.

This bothered Themus.

Why aren't they angry at our eavesdropping? he wondered. *Why do they tolerate us so? Is it fear of the Kyben might? But they are Kyben,*

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too. They call us Stuffed-Shirts, but they are still Kyben. Or were once. What happened to the Kyben might that was born into each of them?

His thoughts were cut off by the sight of an old woman, skin almost yellow-white from age, rapidly wielding a three-pronged pickaxe at the cement of a gutter. He stopped, began dictating, and watched as she broke through the street, pulling out huge gouts of cement-work and dirt from underneath. In a moment she was down on hands and knees, feverishly digging with her gnarled old hands at the dirt.

After thirty-nine minutes, her hands were raw and bleeding, the hole was quite four feet deep, and she kneeled in it, dirt arcing away into the air.

The fifty-minute mark brought her to a halt. She climbed laboriously out of the six-foot hole, grabbed the pickaxe and leaped back in. Themus moved nearer the edge. She was hacking away madly at a sewer pipe some three feet thick.

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In a few moments she had driven a gaping hole in the side of the pipe. She reached into her bodice and brought out a piece of what looked like dirty oilcloth, strung with wires.

Themus was astounded to see both clear water and garbage running out of the pipe. Both were running together. No, they *looked* as though they were running together, but the flow of clean water came spurting out in one direction, while the muck and garbage sprayed forth from the opposite direction. They were running in opposite directions in the same pipe!

She clamped the oilcloth onto the pipe, immediately stopping the escape of the water and refuse, and began filling the hole in. Themus watched her till the hole was neatly packed in, only slightly lower than the street level. She had thrown dirt haphazardly in all directions, and some of it was still evident on car tops and in doorways.

His curiosity could be contained no longer.

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He walked over to the old woman, who was slapping dirt off her polka-dotted dress. Blood from her raw hands spotted the garment. "Excuse me—" he began.

The old woman's face suddenly assumed "Oh no, here they are again!" as its message in life.

"Garbage runs with the drinking water?" He asked the question tremulously, thinking of all the water he had drunk since his arrival, of the number of deaths from botulism and ptomaine poisoning, of the madness of these people.

The old woman muttered something that sounded like "Cretinous Stuffed-Shirt," and began to pick up a bag of groceries obviously dumped in a hurry before the excavating began.

"Are there many deaths from this?" Themus asked, knowing it was a stupid question, knowing the figures must be staggering, wondering if he would be one of the statistics.

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"Hmmpf, man, they don't even bother up and back to flow that way in negative polarization of the garboh, let me away from this maniac!" And she stalked off, dirt dropping in small clots from her polka-dotted dress.

He shook his head several times, trying to clear it, but the buzzing of his brain trying to escape through his ears prevented any comfort. He communicated her passage out of his sight through the Communicator Attachment, received the word she had been picked up by someone else, and started to make his rounds again.

He stopped in mid-stride. It dawned on him suddenly: why hadn't that bit of oilcloth been squirted out of the hole from the pressure in the pipe? What had held it on?

He felt his tongue begin to swell in his mouth, and he realized it had all been deceiving. There had been wires attached to that scrap of oilcloth, they had served some purpose. Undoubtedly that was it. Undoubtedly.

His fine Kyben mind pushed the problem aside.

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He walked on, watching, recording. With a sudden headache.

The afternoon netted a continuous running commentary on the ordinary mundane habits of the Crackpots (biting each other on the left earlobe, which seemed to be a common activity; removing tires from landcars and replacing them with wadded-up articles of clothing; munching loaves of the spiral Kyben bread on the streets; poking long sticks through a many-holed board, to no visible purpose); and several items that Themus considered offbeat even for these warped members of his race:

Item: a young man leaped from the seventeenth storey of an office building, plummeted to the third, landed on an awning, and after bouncing six times, lowered himself off the canvas, through the window, into the arms of an attractive blonde girl holding a stenographic pad, who immediately threw the pad away and began kissing him. He did not seem to be hurt by the fall or the abrupt landing. Themus was not sure whether they

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had been total strangers before the leap, but he did record a break in their amours when his Audio Pickup caught her panting, "What was the name?"

Item: a blind beggar approached him on the street, crying for alms, and when he reached into a pocket to give the fellow a coin, the beggar drew himself taller than Themus had thought he could, and spat directly onto Themus's jump-boots. "Not *that* coin, you clod, not *that* coin. The *other* one." Themus was amazed, for he had but two coins in his pocket and the one intended had been a silver half-kyle and the one the beggar seemed to want was a copper nark. The beggar became indignant at the delay and hurried away, carefully sidestepping a group of men who came hurrying out of an alley.

Item: Themus saw a woman in a televiz booth, rapidly erasing the wall. Viz numbers left there by a hundred occupants suddenly disappeared under the woman's active hands. When she had the walls completely bare she reached into a bag at her feet and brought out a tube of spray-paint.

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In a few minutes the booth was repainted a cherry pink, and was completely dry.

Then she began writing new numbers in. After an hour and a quarter, she left, and Themus did too.

Item: a young woman lowered herself by her legs from the sign above a bar-and-grill, swinging directly into Themus's path.

Even upside down she looked good to Themus. She was wearing a pretty print dress and lavender lace-undies. Themus averted his eyes and began to step around her.

"Hello," she said.

Themus stopped and found himself looking up at her, hanging by her knees from the wooden sign that said, YOU CAN EAT HERE TOO!

She was a beautiful girl, indeed; bright blue hair, a fair golden complexion, high cheekbones, lovely legs, delightful—

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He drew himself to attention, turning his eyes slightly away from her, "Watcher Themus at your service, Miss."

"I like you," she said.

"Ummm?" asked Themus, not quite believing he had heard her correctly.

"Do I stutter?"

"Oh—*no*—certainly *not*!"

"Then you heard what I said."

"Well, yes, I suppose I did."

"Then why ask me to repeat it?"

"Because—because—you just *don't* come down that way and tell someone you like them. It isn't—it isn't—well, it isn't—it just isn't *ladylike*!"

She did a double-flip in the air and came down lightly on the balls of her feet, directly in front of the Watcher. "Oh, swizzlegup! It's ladylike if I

want to do it. If you can't tell I'm a lady just from looking at me, then I'd better find someone who can tell the difference between the sexes."

Themus found himself quite enthralled. Somehow she was not like the rest of the mad inhabitants of this world. She talked logically—although a bit more forwardly than what he had become accustomed to—and she was certainly delightful to look at. He began to ask her name, when a clear, bright picture of the damned Elix came to him. He turned to leave.

She grabbed him roughly by the sleeve, her fingernails tinkling on his armor.

"Wait a minute, where are you going? I'm not finished talking to you."

"I can't talk to you. The Superior doesn't approve." He nervously ran a hand across the bridge of his nose, while looking up and down the street for brother Watchers.

"Oh, urbbledooz! Him!" She giggled. "He doesn't like anything, that's his job. *If you have a job to do, do it, you understand?*" She mimicked Furth's voice faithfully, and Themus grinned in spite of himself. She

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seized on his gesture of pleasure and continued hurriedly, "I'm nineteen. My name is Darfla. What's yours, Themus?"

"I've got to go. I'll be sent to the Mines. This isn't part of my job. I've got to Watch, don't you under—"

"Oh, all right! If I make it part of your stupid Stuffed-Shirt job will you talk to me?" She drew him into a wide, shadowed doorway with much difficulty.

"Well, I don't know how you can make it a part of my—" He looked about him in apprehension. Could he be court-martialed just for talking. Was he doomed already?

She cut in, "You're looking for a man named Boolbak, aren't you?"

"How did you—"

"Are you are you are you are you are you are you are you are?"

"Yes, yes, stop that! I don't know how you found out, but yes, we are, why?" Oddly, he found himself slipping into the running-away speech of

these people, and it was both pleasing and distressing. He was somehow afraid he might be going native. *But in less than two days?*

"He's my uncle. Would you like to meet him?"

"Record!" Themus barked at his dicto-box.

"Oh, *must* you?" Darfla looked toward the twin suns and crossed her arms in exasperation.

Themus's brow furrowed and he reluctantly muttered, "Off," into the box. "I'm a Watcher, and that's what I'm supposed to do. Watch. But if I don't record it all, then they can't send it to Kyben-Central and there won't be any tapes for me, and I'll get sent to the Mines." He stopped, then added, with a finger stiffly pointed between her eyebrows, "And that may not bother *you*, but I've seen reels of the Mines, and crawling through a bore-shaft not much wider than your body dragging an ore-sack tied to your leg, and the chance that sterility won't have time to hit before your face just ups and falls off, well, it sort of makes me worry."

He looked at her, surprised. She was tinkling. Her laughter was actually a tinkle, falling lightly from her and pleasantly tingling his ears. "What are you laughing at?" he frowned, trying to be angry though her laughter made him feel lighter than he had since he'd hit this madball world.

"Your face *ups* and *falls off*!" She laughed again. "That's the kind of thing you Stuffed-Shirts would expect *me* to say! Beautiful! Yes, I'm sure I like you."

The Underclass Watcher was confused. He looked about in confusion, feeling distinctly as though he had come in during the middle of a conversation. "I—I'd better be going. I don't think I want to meet your—"

"All right, all right. Suppose I fix your stupid box so it keeps right on recording; recording things that are happening, in your voice, without your being here, then would you leave it and come with me?"

"Are you out of your mind?" he yelled in a hushed tone.

"Certainly," she said, smiling broadly.

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

He turned once more to leave, angry and annoyed at her making fun of him. Again she stopped him.

"No, I'm sorry. Please, I can do it. Honestly. Here, let me have it."

"Look, I *can't* give you my dicto-box. That's about the most terrible thing a Watcher can do. I'd be—I'd be—they'd hang me, shoot me, starve me, kill me, then send the ashes of my cremated stump to our Mines to be used for feeding the slave-apes. Leave me alone!" The last was a rising note, for the girl had lifted her skirt and drawn a curved knife from her garter-belt and was determinedly prying off the top of the dicto-box, still attached to Themus's chest.

The Watcher fought down a mad impulse to ask her why she was wearing a garter-belt when she wasn't wearing hose, and tried to stop her.

"Wait! Wait! They'll throw me out of the Corps. Stop! Here, let go there, wait a minute, I say waitamminute-forgod'ssake, if you won't stop, at least let me take it off so you don't slice my throat. Here."

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He slipped the shoulder-straps off and unbuckled the belt. The dicto-box fell into the girl's hand and she set to work fumbling about in the machine's intricate innards.

Finally she stood up, her feet lost in a pile of wirespools, vacuum tubes, metal separators, punch-circuits and plastic coils. The box looked empty inside, except for a strangely flotsamlike construction in one corner.

"Look what you've done now!"

"Stop whining, man! It's all right."

"If it's all right, make it record and play back for me." He was terrified, indignant, furious and interested, all at once.

"I can't."

"*Whaaaaaaat!*"

"Why should I? I'm crazy, remember?"

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

Themus felt his face turn to lava. "Damn you! Look what you've done to me! In five minutes you've taken me from my Corps and sentenced me to a life that may be no longer than all the brains you have, stretched end to end!"

"Oh, stop being so melodramatic." She was smiling, tinkling again. "Now you can come with me to meet my uncle. There's no reason why you should stay here. There is a chance the box will play, if you come back to it later, as I said it would. But even if it doesn't, staying here is no help, since it isn't functioning. I'll get a mechanic to fix it, if that will make you any happier."

"No Crackpot mechanic can fix that, you fool! It's a masterpiece of Kyben science. It took hundreds of men thousands of hours to arrive at this—Oh, what's the use!" He sat down in the doorway, head in his hands.

Somehow, her logic was sound. If the box was broken, there was no reason for his refusing to go with her, for staying there could only bring him trouble sooner. It was sound, yes, but only sound on the muggy

foundation of her ruining the machine in the first place. He was beginning to feel like a *tompota*-snake—the kind that swallows its own tail. He didn't know which end was which.

“Come with me.” Her voice had suddenly lost its youthful happiness. It was suddenly strong, commanding. He looked up.

“Get on your feet!”

He arose slowly.

“Now, come with me. If you want to come back to your box, it will be here, and it will work. Right now it will do as well if you believe I'm mad and ruined your dicto-box.” She jerked her head sharply toward the street. “Come on. Perhaps you can reinstate yourself by finding the man named Boolbak.”

It was hopeless there among the remnants of the dicto-box. There was a chance the girl wasn't as totally insane as she seemed and she actually might be Boolbak's niece. And, somehow, against all his better, stricter,

reasoning to the contrary, her logic was queerly sound. In a fugitive sort of way.

He went with her.

(Wondering if he was insane, himself.)

Themus followed the girl through sections of the city Superior Furth had missed during his guided tour of inspection. They passed under a beautifully filigreed arch into a gardened street lined with monstrous blossoms growing to heights of eight and nine feet on either side of the road, casting twin shadows from the bright suns above.

Once he stopped her, in the shadows of a towering flower, and asked, "Why did you decide you wanted me to meet your uncle?"

"I've been watching you all day," she said simply, as if prepared to leave that as a total explanation.

"But why me?"

"I like you," she said, as though being purposely repetitious to impress him. Themus distinctly got the idea she was treating him as she would a very young child.

"Oh. I see," he said, more baffled than before. They continued down the street through an area covered by long, low structures that might have been factories were it not for the impossibly tall and spindly looking towers that reared from the roof of each one. Themus shaded his eyes from the glare of the twin suns as he sought to glimpse what was at the top of each tower. He could see nothing.

"What are those?" he asked. He was surprised to hear his own voice. It sounded like that of an inquisitive little boy.

"Quiet, you."

That was the last thing Darfla said till *they* came out of nowhere and grabbed her and Themus.

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Before the Watcher knew what was happening, a horde, more men than he could count, had surrounded them. They were dressed in everything from loincloth and top hat to burnoose and riding boots. Darfla gave one sharp, tiny squeal and then let her hands fall limply to her sides.

"All right, you want your say, so say!" Anger and annoyance fluttered in her voice.

A short, pockfaced man wearing a suit that appeared to be made from ropes of different colors stepped forward.

"We thought negative (Click-click!) and wanted to talk on this at Cave (Click-click!)." Themus listened with growing amazement. Not only did the man intersperse every few words with a metallic, unnerving tongue-clacking, but he said the word "Cave" with a low, mysterious, important tone totally unlike the rest of his speech which was quite flat and uninflected.

Darfla raised her hands, palms upward, in resignation. "What can I say, Deere, after I say I'm sorry?"

The man addressed as Deere shook his head and said, "(Click-click!) we before talked and him not now *never never never!* Nothing to say against the (Click!) but he's def but def a stuffed one at least well now for a time (Click!). Cave." Same clucking, same cryptic tone when speaking of the Cave. Themus began to worry in direct proportion to the number of surrounders.

"Let's go," Darfla said over her shoulder to Themus, not taking her eyes from Deere.

"W-where?" trembled Themus.

"Cave. Where else?"

"Oh, nowhere—I guess." He tried to be lighthearted about it. Somehow, he failed miserably.

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They started off, the surrounders doing a masterful job of surrounding; cutting Themus and the girl off from anyone who might be looking. They were a walking camouflage.

Darfla began to needle Deere with caustic and, to Themus, cryptic remarks. Deere looked about to turn and put his pudgy fist in her face, and Themus nudged the girl to stop.

"Woof woof a goldfish," she tossed off as a final insult.

"(Click!)" answered Deere, sticking his tongue out.

It was a huge, featureless block in the midst of completely empty ground. Something about it suggested that it was an edifice of total disinterest. Themus recalled buildings he had seen in his youth that had been vaguely like this one. Buildings he would make a point of not bothering to enter, so uninteresting were they.

Inside it was a cave.

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Stalactites hung down from the ceiling in wedge-shaped rockiness. Stalagmites pushed their way up from the floor, spiking the stone underfoot. A mud collar surrounded a small pool in which clear water rippled. The walls were hewn out of rock, the floor was sand-covered stone.

They could have been five miles underground. It was another world.

It was crammed with Crackpots.

Themus walked between two huge men wearing fezzes and sword-belts, behind the clicking Deere and next to Darfla who looked uneasy. Themus felt more than merely uneasy. He was terrified.

"Deere!"

It was Darfla. She had stopped, was being pushed unwillingly by the weight of people moving behind her. "I want this talked out right now. Here. Now. Here. Now. Here. Now—"

"Don't (Click!) try that here, Darfla. We have ours, too, you know (Click-click!)."

"All right. Straight, then."

"Were you taking him to see Boolbak?"

"Yes, why?"

"You know your uncle isn't reliable. He could say anything, Darfla. We have no fear, really, but why tempt the Chances." He pursed his pudgy lips and said, "We'll have to recondition your Watcher, girl. I'm sorry." There was a murmur from the large, restless crowd.

Themus did not know what reconditioning was, nor what the whole conversation had been about, nor who these people were, but he recognized the Watcher part, and the fact that something unpleasant was about to happen to him.

He looked around for a way out, but there was none. He was effectively manacled by the sheer weight of numbers. The Cave was filled, and the walls were lined with people. All they had to do was move in and he'd be squashed.

He remained very still, turned his inward eyes upward and ran painstakingly over the list of his family Lords, offering up to each of them paeans of praise and pleas for help and deliverance.

"No, no!" Darfla was pleading, "He's not really. He's a Kyben. I wouldn't have been able to stand him, would I, if he were a real Stuff?"

Deere bit the inside of his cheek in thought. "We thought so, too, when we got the list, but since he's been here, it's been too early to tell, and now you've let him too close to it all. We don't like this, Darfla, but—"

"Test him. He'll show you." She was suddenly close to Deere, his hand in hers, her face turned down to the fat little man's pudgy stare. "Please, Deere. For what uncle used to be."

Deere exhaled fully, pursed his lips again and said, "All right, Darfla. If the others say it's all right. It's not my decision to make."

He looked around. There was a mutter of assent from the throng. Deere turned to Themus, looking at the Watcher appraisingly.

Then suddenly—

“Here it is: we're mad. You must prove to us *you* are mad. You must do—oh, let's see—five mad acts. Truly mad. Right here in the Cave. You can do anything but harm one of us or try to escape. And we're mad, so we'll know if they're mad acts or not. Now, go on.”

“Tell him the rest, Deere, tell him—” Darfla began.

“Quiet, woman! That's all there is, Watcher. Go on.” He stood back, arms folded across his round little belly.

“Mad? What kind of madness? I mean, like what? I don't ... I can't do any...” Themus looked at Darfla. Something became unhinged within him at the sight of her, about to cry.

He thought for a while. The crowd became impatient, voices called out things from the pack. He thought longer. Then, in a wonderful way, his face smiled all the way from his mouth to his hairline.

Calmly he walked over to Darfla and began undressing her.

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The clack of jaws falling was an audible thing in the sudden silence of the Cave.

Themus stripped her piece by piece, carefully knotting and pulling each piece of clothing before he went on to the next. Blouse. Knot and pull tight. Belt. Knot and pull tight. Skirt. Knot and pull tight.

Darfla offered no resistance, but her face went stoney and her jaw muscles worked rhythmically.

Eventually she was naked to the skin.

Themus bent down, made sure each item of clothing was securely knotted. Then he gathered it all up in a bundle and brought the armful to the girl. She put out her arms and he dropped the bundle into them.

"Knots to you," he said.

"One," said Deere.

Themus could feel small generators in his head begin to spin, whir and grind as they worked themselves up to a monstrous headache.

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He stood spraddle-legged in the open area among the Crackpots, a tall, blue-haired man with a nose just a trifle too long and cheeks just a trifle too sunken, and rubbed his a-trifle-too-long nose in deep concentration.

Again he smiled.

Then he spun three times on his toes, badly, and made a wild dash for one of the onlookers.

The Crackpot looked around in alarm, saw his neighbors smiling at his discomfort, and looked back at Themus, who had stopped directly in front of him.

The Crackpot wore a shirt and slacks of motley, a flat mortarboard-type hat askew over his forehead. The mortarboard slipped a fraction of an inch as he looked at Themus.

The Watcher stood before him, intently staring at his own hand. Themus was clutching his left elbow with his right hand. His left hand was

extended, the fingers bent up like spikes, to form a rough sort of enclosure.

"See my guggle-fish?" asked Themus.

The Crackpot opened his mouth once, strangled a bit, closed his mouth, strangled a bit, opened his mouth again. Nothing came out.

Themus extended his hand directly under the other's nose. It was obviously a bowl he was holding in his hand. "See my guggle-fish?" he repeated.

Confused, the Crackpot managed to say, "W-*what g*-guggle-fish? I don't see any fish."

"That isn't odd," said Themus, grinning, "they all died last week."

Over the roar of the crowd the voice of a blocky-faced man next to the motley-wearer rose:

"I see your guggle-fish. Right there in the bowl. / see them. Now what?"

"You're crazier than I am," said Themus, letting the mythical bowl evaporate as he opened his hand, "I don't have any bowl."

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"Two," said Deere, his brow furrowed.

Without wasting a moment, Themus began shoving the Crackpots toward the wall. Without resistance they allowed themselves to be pushed a bit. Then they stopped.

"For this one I'll need everyone's help," said Themus. "Everybody has to line up. I need everyone in a straight line, a real straight line." He began shoving again. This time they all allowed themselves to be pushed into a semblance of order, a line straight across the Cave.

"No, no," muttered Themus slowly, "that isn't quite good enough. Here." He went to one end, began moving each Crackpot a bit forward or backward till they were all approximately in the same positions of the line.

He went to the right end and squinted down the line.

"You there, fourth from the end, move back a half-step, will you. Uh, yes, that's—just—*stop!* Fine. Now you," he pointed to a fellow with yellow

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bagged-out trousers and no shirt, "move up just a smidgee-un-uh-nuh! *Stop!* That's just perfect."

He stepped back away from them and looked along both ways, surveying them as a general surveys his troops.

"You're all nicely in line. All the same. The Crackpots are neatly maneuvered into being regimented Stuffed-Shirts. Thank you," he said, grinning widely.

"Three," said Deere, blushing and furrowed at the same time.

Themus was pacing back and forth by the time the crowd had hurriedly and self-consciously gotten itself out of rank and clumped around the Cave again.

He paced from one huge stalagmite, kicking it on turning, to the edge of the mud-surrounded pool and began scrabbling in the mud at his feet.

He scooped up two huge handfuls of the runny stuff and carried it a few feet away to a rock surface. Plunking it down he hurried back for another

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handful. This he carried with wild abandon, spraying those near him with drops of the gunk, till he was back where he had deposited the previous load. Then he stopped, considered for a long moment, then placed the mud gingerly atop the other, at an angle.

Then he hurried back for more.

This he again placed with careful deliberation, tongue poking from a corner of his mouth, eyes narrowed in contemplation.

Then another load.

And another.

Each one placed with more care than the last, till he had a huge structure over four feet tall.

He stepped back from it, looked at it, raised his thumb and squinted at it through one eye. Then he raced back to the deep hole that had been gouged out of the mud and took a fingerful of the stuff.

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He ran back, patted it carefully into place, smoothed it with an experienced hand, and stepped back, with a sigh and a look of utter contentment and achievement.

"Ah! Just the way I wanted it," he said...

...and jumped into the hole.

"Four," said Deere, tears of laughter streaming down his cheeks.

Themus sat in the hole, legs drawn up and crossed, hands cupping his chin, elbows on knees. He sat.

And sat longer.

And still sat.

And remained seated.

Deere walked over to him and looked down. "What is the fifth act of madness?"

"There isn't any." More quickly than anyone could follow, he had swiveled back and his head had revolved on his neck in a blur.

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"There isn't any?"

"I'm going to sit here and not do any more."

The crowd murmured again. "What?" cried Deere. "What do you mean, you won't do any more? We set you five. You've done four. Why no fifth?"

"Because if I don't do a fifth, you'll kill me, and I think that's mad enough even for you."

Though Deere's back was turned and he was walking away, Themus was certain he heard "Five" from somewhere

* * * *

"They want you to come back here again after you've seen my uncle," said Darfla, a definite chill in her voice

They were walking briskly down a moving traverseway, the girl a few steps ahead of the Watcher.

Themus knew he had a small problem on his hands.

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"Look, Darfla, I'm sorry about that back there, but it was my life or a little embarrassment for you. It was the first thing I could bring to mind, and I had to stall for time. I'm *really* sorry, but I'm sure they've seen a woman naked before, and you must have been naked before a man before so it shouldn't—"

Themus fell silent. They continued down the traverseway, Darfla striding forward, anger evident in each long step.

Finally the girl came to an intersection of belt-strips and agilely swung across till she was on the slowest-moving outer belt. She stepped off, took several rapid steps to lose momentum, and turned to Themus.

"We'd better stop in here for a moment and get you something to wear over that Watcher uniform. It isn't hard to avoid the Stuffed-Shirts," she said, looking at him with disparagement, "but there's no sense taking foolish chances."

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She indicated a small shop that was all window and no door, with a hastily painted message across one of the panes. ELGIS THE COSTUMER and IF WE DON'T GOT IT, IT AIN'T WORTH HAVING! They entered through a cleverly designed window that spun on a center-pin.

Inside the shop Darfla spoke briefly to a tall, thin Crackpot in black half-mask and body-tight black suit. He disappeared down a shaft in the floor from which stuck a shining pole.

The girl pulled a bolt of cloth off a corner of the counter and perched herself with trim legs crossed. Themus stood looking at the shop.

It was a costumer's all right, and with an arrangement and selection of fantastic capacities. Clothing ranged from rustic Kyben farmgarb to the latest spun plastene fibers from all over the Galaxy. He was marveling at the endless varieties of clothing when the tall, thin Crackpot slid back up the pole.

He stepped off onto the floor, much to Themus's amazement, and no elevator-disc followed him. It appeared that the man had come up the pole the same way he had gone down, without mechanical assistance. Themus was long past worrying over such apparent inconsistencies. He shrugged and looked at the suit the fellow had brought up with him.

Ten minutes later he looked at the suit on himself, in a full-length mirror-cube, and smiled at his sudden change from Underclass Watcher Themus to a sheeted and fetish-festooned member of the Toad-Revelers cult found on Fewb-huh IV.

His earrings hung in shining loops to his shoulders, and the bag of toad-shavings on his belt felt heavier than he thought it should. He pulled the drawstring on the bag and gasped. They *were* toad-shavings. He tucked the bottom folds of the multicolored sheet into his boot-tops, swung the lantern onto his back, and looked at Darfla in expectation.

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He caught her grinning, and when he, too, smiled, her face went back to its recent stoniness.

Darfla made some kind of arrangement with Elgis, shook his hand, bit his ear, said, "How are the twins, Elgis?" to which the costumer replied, "Eh!" in a lackadaisical tone, and they left.

The rest of the trip through the patchwork-quilt of Valasah was spent in silence.

The Crackpots were not what they seemed. Of that Themus was certain. He had been very stupid not to notice it before, and he thought the Watchers must be even more stupid for not having seen it in all their hundreds of years on Kyba.

But there was a factor he did not possess. Garbage and water that ran in different directions through the same pipe, a beggar that knew how many coins he had in his pocket, a girl who could rip out the innards of a dicto-box, leaving it so it would work—and somehow he was now certain

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it *would* work—without a human behind it, and a full-sized cave built inside a concrete block. These were not the achievements of madmen.

But they *were* mad!

They had to be. All the things which seemed mysterious and superhuman were offset by a million acts of out-and-out insanity. They lived in a world of no standardization, no conformity at all. There was no way to gauge the way these people would act, as you could with the Kyben of the stars. It was—it was—well, *insane*!

Themus's nose itched in confusion, but he refrained from unseemly scratching.

* * * *

“Don't I look like Santa Claus?” he said.

“Who?” asked Themus, looking at the roly-poly florid face and bushy beard. He tried to ignore the jaggedly yellow scar that reached from temple to temple.

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"Santa Claus, Santa Claus, you lout? Haven't you ever heard of the Earthmen's mythical hero, Santa Claus? He was the hero of the Battle of the Alamo, he discovered what they call The Great Pyramid of Gizeh, he was the greatest drinker of milk out of wooden shoes that planet ever knew!"

"What's milk?" asked Themus.

"Lords, what a clod!" He screwed up his lips in a childish pout. "I did immense research work on the subject. Immense!" Then he muttered, under his breath, almost an afterthought, "Immense."

The old man was frightened. It showed, even through the joviality of his garb and appearance.

Themus could not understand the old man. He looked as though he would be quite the maddest of the lot, but he talked in a soft, almost whispering voice, lucidly, and for the most part of familiar things. Yet

there was something about him which set him apart from the other Crackpots. He did not have the wild-eyed look.

No one was saying anything and the sounds of their breathing in the basement hide-out was loud in Themus's ears. "Are you Boolbak, the steel-pincher?" the Watcher asked, to make conversation. It seemed like the thing to say.

The bearded oldster shifted his position on the coal pile on which he was sitting, blackening his beard, covering his red suit with dust. His voice changed from a whisper to a shrill. "A spy! A spy! They've come after me. You'll do it to me! You'll bend it! Get away from me, get away from me, gedda way from me, geddawayfromee!" The old man was peering out from over the top of the pile, pointing a shaking finger at Themus.

"Uncle Boolbak!" Darfla's brows drew down and she clapped her hands together. The old man stopped shouting and looked at her.

"What?" he asked, pouting childishly.

"He's no spy, whatever he is," she said, casting a definitely contemptuous glance at Themus. "He was a Watcher alerted to find you. I liked him," she said, looking toward the ceiling to find salvation for such a foul deed, "and I thought that it was about time you stopped this nonsense of yours and spoke to one of them. So I brought him here."

"Nonsense? Nonsense, is it! Well, you've sealed my doom, girl! Now they'll bend it around your poor uncle's head as sure as Koobis and Poorah rise every morning. Oh, what have you done?"

The girl shook her head sadly, "Oh, stop it, will you. No one wants to hurt you. Show him your steel-pinching."

"No!" he answered, pouting again.

Themus watched in amazement. The man was senile. He was a tottering, doddering child. Of what possible use could he be? Of what possible *interest* could he be to both the Watchers and the Crackpots, who had tried to stop Darfla's bringing him here?

Suddenly the old man smiled secretly and moved in closer, sidling up to the Watcher as though he had a treasure everyone was after. He made small motions with his pudgy fingers, indicating he wanted Themus's attention, his patience, his silence, and his ear, in that order. It was a most eloquent motioning, and Themus found he was complying, though no vocal request had been made. He bent closer.

Uncle Boolbak dug into a pocket of the red coal-coated jacket, and fished out a cane-shaped, striped piece of candy. "Want a piece of candy? Huh, want it, huh?"

Themus felt an urge to bolt and run, but he summoned all his dignity and said, "I'm Themus, Underclass Watcher, and I was told you—pinch steel. Is that right?"

For a moment the old man looked unhappy that the Watcher did not want any candy, then suddenly his face hardened. The eyes lost their twinkle and looked like two cold diamonds blazing at him. Boolbak's

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voice, too, became harder, more mature, actually older. "Yes, that's right, I 'pinch' steel, as you put it. You wonder what that means, eh?"

Themus found himself unable to talk. The man's whole demeanor had changed. The Watcher suddenly felt like a child before a great intellect. He could only nod.

"Here. Let me show you." The old man went behind the furnace and brought out two plates of steel. From a workbench along one wall he took a metal punch and a double-headed hammer. He threw down one of the plates, and handed Themus the punch and hammer.

"Put a hole in this with that punch," he said, motioning Themus toward the other plate, which he had laid flat on the workbench.

Themus hesitated. "Come, come, boy. Don't dawdle."

The Watcher stepped to the workbench, set the punch on the plate and tapped lightly till he had a hole started. Then he placed the punch in it again and brought the hammer down on its head with two swift strokes.

The clangs rang loud in the dim basement. The punch sank through the plate and went a quarter-inch into the table. "I didn't hit it very hard," Themus explained, looking over his shoulder at "Santa Claus."

"That's all right. It's very soft steel. Too many impurities. Kyben spacecraft are made of a steel which isn't too much better than this, though they back it with strong reinforcers. Now watch."

He took the plate in his hand, holding it between thumb and forefinger at one corner, letting it hang down. With the other hand he pinched it at the opposite corner, pressing thumb and forefinger together tightly.

The plate crumbled to dust, drifting down over the old man's pinching hand in a bright stream.

Themus's mouth opened of its own accord, his chest tightened. Such a thing wasn't possible. The old man was a magician.

The dust glowed up at him from the floor. It was slightly luminous. He goggled, unable to help himself.

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"Now," said Boolbak, taking the other plate. "Put a hole in this one."

Themus found he was unable to lift the hammer. His hands refused to obey. One did not see such things and remain untouched.

"Snap out of it, boy! Come on, punch!" The old man's voice was commanding; Themus broke his trance.

He placed the punch on the second plate and in three heavy blows had gone through it and into the table again.

"Fine, fine," said Uncle Boolbak, holding the second plate as he had the first. He pinched it, with a slight revolving movement of the fingers.

The steel seemed to change. It stayed rigid in shape, but the planes of it darkened, ran together. It was a flat piece of metal, but suddenly it seemed to have depths, other surfaces.

Boolbak held it out to Themus, "Put another hole in it."

Themus took it, wonderingly, and laid it down on the workbench. It seemed heavier than before. He brought the hammer down sharply, three times.

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The metal was unmarred.

He set the punch and hammered again, harder, half a dozen times. He took the punch away. Its point was dulled, the punch shank was slightly bowed. The metal was unscarred.

"It's—it's—" he began, his tongue abruptly becoming a wad of cotton batting in his mouth.

Boolbak nodded, "It's changed, yes. It is now harder than any steel ever made. It can withstand heat or cold that would either melt to paste or shatter to splinters any other metal. It is impregnable. It is the ideal war-metal. With it an army is invincible. It is the closest thing to an ultimate weapon ever devised, for it is unstoppable.

"A tank composed of this metal would be a fearsome juggernaut. A spaceship of it could pierce the corona of a sun. A soldier wearing body armor of it would be a superman." He stood back, his lips a thin line, letting Themus look dumbfoundedly at the plate he held.

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

"But how do you—how can you—it's impossible! How can you make this? What have you done to it?" Themus felt the room swirl around him, but that defied the laws of the universe.

"Sit down. I want to talk to you. I want to tell you some things." He put one arm around Themus's shoulders, leading him to a flight of stairs, to sit down.

Themus looked at Darfla. She was biting her lip. Was this the talk the Crackpots did not want him to have with Uncle Boolbak?

Themus sensed: this is it. This is an answer. Perhaps not *the* answer to all that troubled him, but it was, unquestionably, *an* answer.

Suddenly he didn't want to know. He was afraid; terribly afraid. He stammered. "Do-do you think you should? I'm a Watcher, you know, and I don't want to—"

The old man cut him off with a wave of his hand, and pushed him down firmly.

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

"You think you're watching us, don't you?" began Boolbak. "I mean, you think the Watcher Corps was assigned here to keep an eye on all the loonies, don't you? To keep the black sheep in the asylum so the Star-Flung Kyben don't lose face or esteem in the Galaxy, isn't that it?"

Themus nodded, reluctantly, not wanting to insult the old man.

Boolbak laughed. "Fool! We *want* you here. Do you think for a moment we'd allow you blundering pompous snoopers around if we didn't have a use for you?"

"Let me tell you a story," the old man went on. "Hundreds of years ago, before what you blissfully call the Kyben Explosion into space, both Crackpots and Stuffed-Shirts lived here, though they weren't divided that way, back then. The Stuffed-Shirts were the administrators, the implements of keeping everything neatly filed, and everyone in line. That type seems to gravitate toward positions of influence and power.

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

"The Crackpots were the nonconformists. They were the ones who kept coming up with the new ideas. They were the ones who painted the great works of art. They were the ones who composed the most memorable music. They were the ones who overflowed the lunatic asylums. They thought up the great ideas, true, but they were a thorn in the side of the Stuffs, because they couldn't be predicted. They kept running off in all directions at once. They were a systematic problem. So the Stuffs tried to regiment them, keep them in line, gave them tedious little chores to do, compartmentalized them in thought, in habits, in attitudes. The noncons snapped. There is no record of it, but there was almost a war on this planet that would have wiped out every Kyben—of both breeds—to the last man."

He rubbed a hand across his eyes, as if to wipe away unpleasant images.

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

Themus and Darfla listened, intently, their eyes fastened to those of the old man in his ridiculous costume. Themus knew Darfla must have heard the story before, but still she strained to catch every sound Boolbak made.

"Luckily, the cooler heads won. An alternate solution was presented, and carried out. You've always thought the Kyben left their misfits, the Crackpots, behind. That we were left here because we weren't good enough, that we would disgrace our hard-headed pioneers before the other races, isn't that the story you've always heard? That we are the black sheep of the Kyben?"

He laughed, shaking his head.

"Fools! We threw you out! We didn't want you tripping all over our heels, annoying us. We weren't left behind—you were thrown away!"

Themus's breath caught in his throat. It was true. He knew it was true. He had no doubts. It was so. In the short space of a few seconds the whole structure of his life had been inverted. He was no longer a member

of the elite corps of the elite race of the universe; he was a clod, an unwanted superfluity, a tin soldier, a carbon copy.

He started to say something, but Boolbak cut him off. "We have nothing against ruling the Galaxy. We like the idea, in fact. Makes things nice when we want something unusual and it takes influence to get it quickly. But why should we bother doing the work when we can pull a string or two and one of you armor-plated puppets will perform the menial tasks.

"Certainly we allow you to rule the Galaxy. It keeps you out of trouble, and out of our hair. You rule the Galaxy, but *we* rule *you!*"

Thunder rolled endlessly through the Watcher's head. He was being bombarded with lightning, and he was certain any moment he would rip apart. It was too much, all too suddenly.

Boolbak was still talking: "We keep the Watcher Corps on other worlds both for spying purposes and as a cover-up. So we can have a Watcher Corps here on Kyba without attracting any attention to

ourselves. A few hundred of you aren't that much bother, and it's ridiculously easy to avoid you when we wish to. Better than a whole planet of you insufferable bores."

He stopped again, and pointed a pudgy finger at Themus's chest armor.

"We established the Watcher Corps as a liaison between us, when we had innovations, new methods, concepts ready for use, and you, with your graspy little hands always ready to accept what the 'lunatics back home' had come up with.

"Usually the ideas were put into practice and you never knew they originated here.

"We made sure the Watchers' basic motto was to watch, watch, watch, whatever we did, to save ourselves the trouble of getting the information back where it would do the most good, undistorted—and believe me, if we didn't want you to see something, it wasn't hard to hide it from you; you're really quite simple and stupid animals—so when we had a new

invention or concept, all we had to do was walk into a public square and demonstrate it for you. *Pegulla*, see—*pegulla*, do."

Themus mused aloud, interrupting the old man, "But what does, well, stacking *juba*-fruits in the square demonstrate?"

"We wouldn't expect your simple-celled minds to grasp something like that immediately," answered Boolbak. "But I happen to know Shella, who did that, and I know what he was demonstrating. He was illustrating a new system of library filing, twice as efficient as the old one.

"He knew it would be dictated, sent back to Kyben-Central and finally understood for what it was. We give you enough clues. If something seems strange, think about it a while, and a logical use and explanation will appear. Unfortunately, that is the one faculty the Star-Flung Kyben are incapable of using. Their minds are patterned, their thoughts set in tracks." The laugh was a barb this time.

"But why are you all so—so—*mad*?" Themus asked, a quavering note in his voice.

"Beginning to crack, boy? I'll tell you why we're *mad*, as you put it. We're not mad, we're just doing what we want, when we want, the way we want. You rigid-thinkers can't recognize the healthy sanity of that. You think everyone has to wear a standardized set of clothes, go to his dentist a specified number of times, worship in delineated forms, marry a specified type of mate. In other words, live his life in a mold.

"The only way to stimulate true creativeness is to allow it to grow unchained with restrictions. We're not mad at all. We may put on a bit, just to cover from you boobs, but we're saner than you. Can you change the molecular structure of a piece of steel, just by touching it at a juncture of atom-chains?"

"Is that—that—how you did it?" Themus asked.

"Yes. How far could I have gotten on a thing of this kind if I'd grown up in a culture like the one you've always known?

"For every mad thing you see on this world, there is a logical, sane answer."

Themus felt his knees shaking. This was all too much to be taken at one sitting. The very fiber of his universe was being unwound.

He looked at Darfla for the first time in what seemed an eternity, and found it impossible to tell what she was thinking.

"But why haven't you shown this steel-pinching to the Watchers, if you want them to know all the new concepts?" the incredulous Themus questioned.

Boolbak's face suddenly went slack. The eyes became glassy and twinkly again. His face became flushed. He clapped his hands together childishly. "Oh, no! I don't want that!"

"But why?" demanded Themus.

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

Again the old man's face changed. This time abject terror shone out. He began to sweat. "They're gonna chase me, and bend a bar of iron around my head."

He leaped up and ran in a flurry back to the coal pile, where he burrowed into the black dust and peered out, trembling.

"But that's crazy! No one wants to bend a bar of iron around your head. Only a maniac would keep a secret like that because of a crazy reason like that!"

"Exactly," came Darfla's voice from behind him, sadly. "That's just it. Uncle *is* crazy."

* * * *

They had wanted to see Themus after his talk with Uncle Boolbak, and though Darfla had taken pains to cover their tracks, a group of Crackpots were waiting outside the house when they emerged.

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

Themus was white and shaking, and made no movement of resistance as they were hustled into a low-slung bubble-roadster and whisked back to the Cave.

"Well, did he talk to that mad genius?" asked Deere.

Darfla nodded sullenly. "Just as you said. He knows."

Deere turned to Themus. "Not quite all, however. Do you think you can take more, Watcher?"

Themus felt distinctly faint. One microscopic bit more added to the staggering burden of revelation he had had tossed on him, and he was prepared to sink through the floor.

However, Deere was not waiting for an answer. He motioned to a man in a toga and spiked belt, who came toward Themus. "See this man?" Deere asked.

Themus said yes. Deere tapped the man lightly on the chest, "Senior Watcher, First Grade, Norsim, lately disappeared from the barracks at

Kyba-Base, Valasah." He pointed to three others standing together near the front of the crowd. "Those three were top men in the Corps, over a period of ten years. Now they're Crackpots."

Themus's eyebrows and hands asked, "But how?"

"There is a gravitating factor among Kyben," Deere explained. "There are Crackpots who are brought up as Stuffs who realize when they get here that their thinking has been fettered. Eventually they come to us. They come to us for the simple reason that the intellect rises through the Watcher ranks, and for several reasons gets assigned here. We've made sure the smartest boys get their final assignment here with us.

"On the other side of the ledger there are noncons who go psycho from the responsibility of being a freethinker. They want supervision, they need their thinking directed. They eventually wind up as Kyben, after minor reconditioning so they don't remember all this," he waved his hand

to indicate the Cave. "Now they're somewhere out there and probably quite happy."

"But how can you make a Watcher disappear so completely, when the whole garrison here is looking—"

"Simple," said a voice from behind Themus.

Supervisor Furth just stood smiling.

Themus just stood choking.

The elder Watcher grinned at the confusion swirling about Themus's face.

"How did—when were you—" Themus stuttered.

Furth raised a hand to stop him. "I was an unbending Stuff for a good many years, Themus, before I realized the Crackpot in me wanted out." He grinned widely. "Do you know what did it? I was kidnapped, put in a barrel with a bunch of chattering *pegullas*, and forced to think my way out. I finally made it, and when I crawled out, all covered with *pegulla-*

dung, those grinning maniacs helped me up and said, 'More fun than a barrel of *pegullas*!'"

Themus began to chuckle.

"That did it," said Furth.

"But why do you send men like Elix back to the Mines? You must know how horrible it is. That isn't at all consistent."

Furth's mouth drew down at the corner, "It is, when you consider that I'm supposed to be the iron hand of the Watcher garrison here on Kyba. We have to keep the Stuffs in line. They have to be maneuvered, while they think they're maneuvering us. And Elix was getting too far out of line."

"Do you know how close to being killed you came when we brought you here the first time?" Deere said.

Themus turned back to the pockfaced little man, "No. I—I—thought you'd just send me back and let the Corps deal with me."

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

"Hardly. We aren't afraid of our blundering brothers with the armored hides, but we certainly don't take wide chances to attract attention to ourselves. We like our freedom too much for that.

"You see, we aren't play-acting at being odd. We actually enjoy and live the job of being individuals. But there is a logic to our madness. Nothing we do is folly."

"But," Themus objected, "what are the explanations for things like—" and he finger-listed several things that had been bothering him.

"The garbage is negatively polarized, so it touches nothing but its side of the sewer pipes," explained Furth. "The beggar, who by the way is a professional numismatist, can sense the 'structural aura' of various metals, that's how he knew how many and what type coins you had in your pocket. The Cave here is merely an adequate job of force-moving large areas of soil and rock, and atomic realignment..."

He explained for a few more minutes, Themus's astonishment becoming deeper and deeper at each further revelation of what he had considered superhuman achievements. Finally, the young Watcher asked, "But why haven't these discoveries been turned over to Kyben-Central?"

"There are some things our little categorizing brothers aren't ready for, as yet," explained Deere. "Even you were not ready. Chance saved you, you know."

Themus looked startled. "Chance?"

"Well, chance, and your innate intelligence, boy. We had to see if there was enough noncon in you to allow you to live. The reconditioning in your case would have been—ah—something of a failure. The five mad acts you were to perform not only had to be mad—they had to be *logically* mad. They each had to illustrate a point."

"Wait a minute," said Themus. "I had no idea what I was going to do. I just did it, that's all."

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

"Um-hm. Quite right, but if *you* didn't know, at least your subconscious was able to put two and two together and come up with the proper four. The acts you did demonstrated you had courage enough to be a noncon, that you were smart enough to maneuver us Crackpots—so it would be easy enough for you to help us maneuver the Stuffs—that you could be a noncon thinker when you had to be, and even you knew you were too valuable to kill.

"Even if *you* weren't in on it, your subconscious and the rest of *us* were."

"But—but—what I don't get is, why did you try to stop me from seeing Boolbak and then let me go, and why does Boolbak hide from you and the Watchers both?"

"One at a time," replied Deere. "Boolbak hides because he *is* mad. There are some like that in every group. He happens to be a genius, but he's also a total madman. We don't try to keep tabs on him, because we already have the inventions he's come up with, but we don't put him out

of the way because he might get something new one of these days we *don't* have, and then, too, he was a great man once, long before—" He stopped suddenly, realizing he had stepped over the line from explanation to bathos. "We're not barbarians. Nor are we a secret underground movement. We don't want to overthrow anything, we just want to do as we please. If our brothers feel like foaming up and ruling star-systems, all well and good, it makes it easier for us to obtain the things we want, so we help them in a quiet way. Boolbak isn't doing anyone any harm, but we didn't think you were ready to be exposed to too much noncon thinking all at once, as we knew Boolbak would do. He always does.

"But Darfla was so concerned, and she seemed to like you, so we took a chance. It seemed to work out, luckily for you."

Themus looked at the girl. She was staring at him as though a layer of ice covered her. He smiled to himself.

Any amount of ice can be thawed by the proper application of intensive heat.

"We didn't want you to see him at first," Deere went on, "because we knew he would dump the cart. But when you showed us you were flexible enough to do the five mad acts, we knew you could take what Boolbak had to say.

"And we let him explain it, instead of us, because he's one damned fine storyteller. He can hold the interest. He's a born minstrel and you'd believe him before us."

"But why did he tell me all that? I thought you wanted it all kept quiet? He hardly knew me and he explained the whole situation, the way it really is. Why?" Themus inquired.

"Why? Because he's completely out of his mind—and he's a big-mouth to boot," Deere stated. "We tolerate Boolbak, but we make sure he keeps away from the Watchers, for the most part. If he does get through, though, it eventually shuttles to Furth and we snap a lid on it. I suppose

he was ready to tell you because Darfla brought you to him. He has a soft spot for her.

"What I want to know is, why did Darfla take you off your rounds in the first place?"

Darfla looked up. She had been idly running her toe through the mud near the pool. "I went through his dossier. He was too brilliant for the Corps. His record indicated any number of checkpoints of upper-level intelligence. So I went and found him. He didn't react as most Stuffs would have, when I applied a few stimuli, such as ruining his dicto-box."

Themus winced at the memory of the dicto-box.

"But what made you look up his dossier?" demanded Furth.

Darfla hesitated, and a gold blush crept up her cheeks. "I saw him get off the ship from Penares-Base. I—well—I rather liked his appearance. You know." She looked down again, embarrassed.

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

Deere made a gun with thumb and forefinger, pointed it at her, "If you don't stop taking these things into your own hands! There's a group who looks into things like that. We'd have gotten to him in time."

Themus rubbed his nose in amazement. "I—I just can't believe all this. It's so fantastic. So unreal."

"No more unreal to believe every man is a single brain with individual thoughts than to believe he's a member of a group mind with the same thoughts for all."

He clapped the Watcher on the back.

"Are you prepared to drop your life as a Watcher and become one of us? I think you'll be quite a find. Your five acts were the maddest we've seen in a long time."

"But I'm not a Crackpot. I'm a Stuffed-Shirt. I've always been one."

"Bosh! You were brought up to think you were one. We've shown you there are other ways to think, now use them."

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

Themus considered. He'd never really had anything, as a member of the Kyben race—the rulers of the universe—but a constant unease and a fear of the Mines. These people all seemed so free, so clever, so—so—He was at a loss for words.

“Can you take me out of sight of the Corps?” he asked.

“Easiest thing in the world,” said Furth, “to make you drop out of sight as Themus, the Watcher, and make you reappear as—let's say—Gugglefish, the Crackpot Mountebank.”

Themus's face broke into the first full, unreserved smile he could recall. “It's a deal, I suppose. I've always wanted to live in a madhouse. The only thing that bothers me is Uncle Boolbak. You fool the Stuffs by pretending madness, and well—*you* consider Boolbak mad, so perhaps—”

He stopped when he saw the perplexed looks that came over the Crackpots' faces. It *was* a germ of thought.

“Welcome home, maniac,” said Deere.

The Crackpots
by Harlan Ellison

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