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# UNIVERSE

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# THE CRAZY MAN

By R. J. McGregor

*On the surface Belleville looks much like any other small town and, basically, it is. But Belleville has a secret, and they're not telling anybody about the day Doc Janney came home.*

*Illustrated by H. W. McCauley*

**I**F a stranger came asking, we'd tell him nothing happened here Saturday morning. Belleville is that kind of a Midwest, shrinking, six-hundred-population town. But something *big* happened, right between my service station and Clem Brady's cafe in the middle of the street.

It's been my job, fourteen years as deputy sheriff, to keep the peace. That's why I had to shoot old Doc Janney in public Saturday. There's still evidence, but it will never be reported. It can't be . . .

Being the law isn't much of a job here, so I run the station. It was my father's blacksmith shop. I put in the gas pumps and the soda-pop machine. It's still got

the four big elm trees and the six steel-slat benches he made because he liked to have people around.

The only way you could tell it was Saturday was by counting the bench loafers, the town codgers. Most of them still work during the week. It was hot and muggy. You could smell the potroast across the street—Clem Brady's 'Sunday Special.' You could hear the flies buzzing twenty feet away it was so quiet, mostly.

You could tell it was June by the kind of weeds growing, the grass, the trees, crickets, birds, the sneeze-pollen in the air, and the way my dog, Razz, panted and shed hair around and wagged that monstrosity of a tail I'd never had

the heart to bob. Everybody in town thought Razz ought to be bobbed. About the only way you could tell what year it was would have been to look at the calendar. That's Belleville.

Seventy years ago our most distinguished citizen was born out on the old Johnson place—Doc Janney. He was twenty years before my time, but I hear he licked most of the men his age before he went east and took up teaching philosophy in a university. Taught thirty-one years, till his wife died. Then he just packed up and left all the big words behind and came home. He said country blood stays in you.

He came back five years ago. Spent a lot of time on my dad's benches. Wouldn't argue much with a man on religion or politics. Said he'd studied so much in his time he didn't know enough to argue. Not till he went looney. Then he really started arguing.

Told everybody he saw things in the sky. Things that weren't there. He even swore, one day, that a thing had landed on his farm. And that *little* people had got out of the thing and had stayed a while for coffee, talking.

Well—the county seat newspaper heard of it and out came the reporters. Then the welfare people, then the warrant. They tied



up his university pension.

At the sanity hearing we took oaths and testified what the doc had told us. The state psychiatrists examined him.

They sent him down to the State Mental Hospital by the river at Exiter.

Doc was otherwise sane — I'd swear to that—but he believed he'd seen those 'flying saucer' things. He was always a tough bird. I think he would have preferred to die, rather than change his story. I talked to him about it. Talk about being pig-headed!

But he said they were kind to him at Exiter, respected him. Took his word that he wouldn't run away. And he loved to fish, so they let him out the main gate each afternoon, alone, and he fished in the river without a guard. I fished with him a dozen times.

One time he sat there with me and tears came in his eyes.

"Jeb," he said to me, "you don't believe me, either."

What could I say.

Then Doc smiled, faraway, happy, crazy. He sat there bobbing his line and he said:

"They came to visit me. And I'm going to ask them to prove I'm sane. They'll do it, too."

He caught a catfish just then, and I was grateful to that fish.

That was four years ago. He

disappeared from the hospital. Some thought he drowned — suicide, but not me. Nobody thought him dangerous. It was for his own good that they drew up the new warrant and gave a copy to me. Meantime, we nearly forgot him.

But Saturday morning we saw a man walking down Three-Mile road from Four Corners. Right after a pickup farm truck went past and raised a dust cloud. We put on our glasses and sized him up and started wagering soda-pops on his identity.

Somebody said: "Doc Janney," and we all stood up, staring.

He came closer. It looked like Doc had lost that arthritic forward-bend in his back. Mighty spry for seventy.

There was a little ripple of excitement on the benches and somebody said, plain as day:

"Doc's casting a shadow, too." That's the kind of a town Belleville is. And somebody else got up, casually, and sauntered pretty fast over to Clem's cafe and Clem came right out front and stood there, with a growing group on his side. Must have been twenty men on my side already.

Doc came up and stood ten feet beyond the gas pumps and just looked at us—mostly at me.

"You've got another warrant for

me, Jeb," he said.

I nodded.

"You intend to arrest me?"

"It's my job."

He shook his head and said, "I won't let you. I can't leave Belleville with every friend I've got here in this world thinking I'm a lunatic."

He didn't look insane, and he looked like he meant it. We shuffled our feet. Some of the men sat down, quietly. One went over to Doc and reached out and touched him — just to make sure — and came back nodding.

If Doc hadn't been so old, he'd have looked like a man come to town looking for trouble. I felt there was no point in prolonging it, so I went inside and got the warrant and took it to him. He read it and put it in a pocket, shaking his head. Then he looked up at the sky, as if he still could see things there.

"Come on over and have a soda and sit a while," I said.

"While you phone the sheriff?" he said.

I nodded.

My dog, Razz, went over and nuzzled Doc's leg and wagged that monstrosity of a tail and sat down in the dirt, growling a little — which was unusual.

"You've got to believe me," Doc said. "They did visit me on the

farm. They took me from the hospital at Exiter. That's where I've been all this time."

"Sure," I said.

"I've got a weapon in my hand," Doc said.

There was nothing in his hand.

He stood there and he called: "Come and get me."

Some of the loafers had been standing around him, almost in a circle. They felt the fires burning in old Doc and they started backing away in all directions.

One of them, backing up, gave a sudden cry and threw up an arm and then ducked and scuttled like a rabbit clear across the street. Over there he backed flat against the brick wall and just stood.

It seemed Doc eyed the man with satisfaction.

I hadn't used my badge and gun in six months, officially. I do practice shooting a lot, because I don't like the thought of killing a man needlessly. But I'd heard that the sight of a lawman's gear has an effect on certain deranged minds. So I put them on and came out as a deputy should—facing a maniac.

All the men, and a few women now, standing around, demanding silently that I do my duty. They were very curious, a bit excited. Not afraid yet. A little old man like Doc couldn't do much.

Razz was close to Doc, growling, sensing Doc's hostility, beginning to bark.

A crowd of people can put you in an awful spot. Even if they're your friends. None of them had ever seemed to feel I wasn't man enough to do my duty. But now they started edging away, watching *me*—not Doc. It's a bad feeling.

Except for the time when I actually went up and handed Doc the warrant, I'd stayed away from him. I thought he would read it and give up gracefully, and keep his dignity. I knew how important dignity was to him. But he stood there, and everybody looked at me. And I'd already dressed up like an Old West sheriff, just on account of Doc, and it made me feel mighty bad.

But I came around the west gas pump, slow, and toward him. And I hated every step, because when there was no more walking to do, I'd have to grab him, like you would a bum, or a drunk, or a stray dog. With everybody looking. It was the first time I'd ever wanted to turn in my badge.

It got so quiet, between my gravel-crunching steps, you could hear the flies buzzing.

Razz wasn't trained for anything. Just a good old dog. He started growling, barking, wagging

his tail, prancing between us.

I told him to shut up, and he did.

Then I noticed he wasn't wagging his tail. I bent down and stared. I reached and picked up the tail. Razz had a two-inch stump, cut off neat as a razor slice, already healed. No blood. And the dog didn't even miss it.

I put the tail behind my back and snapped my fingers and the dog leaped up and put his front paws on my thigh and looked at my face the way a dog will. And he started wagging his hind end, and only then he must have felt something missing.

But just then a flea got him in the left shoulder and he hunkered down and went after it, so I put the tail up on top of the gas pump and looked at Doc.

"You know I wouldn't hurt that dog," Doc said. "My weapon seals off tissue and sensation as it cuts." He backed off a couple of steps.

His hand was still empty.

"Jeb," he said. "Listen to me. My friends from the sky can't understand you humans. To them, this thing in my hand is a surgical instrument only. They have no weapons. They've come here for years, trying to make friends. But they've found only a dozen people who would so much as *talk to them*. The others become panicky,

call the air force, have them shot down. So they don't let you see them anymore."

"Sure," I said. I tried to make my voice soothing.

"All they ever wanted," Doc persisted, "was an element, a common earth mineral. Just a small amount. So they're here now, taking it out of streams, out of water washing down to the sea, wasted anyway."

I put my hand on my gun.

"Look over your shoulder," Doc said.

I didn't look until something sizzled over my right shoulder and there was a ripping sound. The big glass ornament atop the gas pump was being cut, without shattering, the way a knife slips through soft butter. Then both halves of the ornament fell and broke. Doc's eyes met mine.

"It can slice a house or a truck or a man," he said softly.

"Whatever it is," I said, "drop it."

"Yeah," Clem Brady called across the street, "make him drop it."

Doc shook his head and grinned.

Did you ever watch a young bucko liquored up in a tavern, a fellow who loves to be worked into a fight, when some easy mark starts asking for it—the way his eyes light up, the way he grins.

That's how Doc looked at me, at everybody.

Clem Brady hollered at me: "Take him, Jeb."

Doc hefted his hand, like he was feeling the invisible gun in his grasp.

"It's got a barrel and a handle and a trigger," he said. "But it's not supposed to be used as a gun, even if they can make it explode like a hand grenade. It simply reflects light into our next-up continuum which we can't see. But it's real." He kept grinning at me like that. "Isn't it real, Jeb?"

I looked quickly at the crowd. My friends. Doc's friends.

"What are you waiting for?" somebody hollered.

"Yeah," somebody else said. "Ain't scared, are you, Jeb?"

I knew I'd have to hurt Doc, so I was scared. He pointed his right hand at me, three fingers crooked, as if around a gun butt, the fourth curled as if around a trigger. I drew my gun, a .38 caliber police special revolver. I held it out and pointed up, on safety. I thought the gesture would be enough, and I tried not to think of Razz' tail and the pump ornament. I tried to think of Doc as a maniac. An inch of my barrel dropped off.

"Jeb," he said, "a man's reputation among his own people is all

he's got. That's why I have to do this. To prove I'm not insane."

"Doc," I said, "That's why I've got to do this. I'm the law."

I shot him once through the fleshy part of the upper right arm, missing the bone. I saw his right hand go limp and open as his left grabbed for the wound. And I heard something clunk to the ground at his feet—where nothing had fallen.

I went over and pushed him back and I knelt and groped on the ground until my hand found something gun-sized and gun-shaped and invisible. I picked it up in my left and hefted it and pointed it carefully into the ground.

Doc stood there holding his arm, bleeding a lot, looking at me, then up in the sky. I looked up and saw nothing.

Half a dozen men started moving in to grab Doc now.

"Stand back, there," I hollered. "All of you."

They knew I meant it.

"I knew you'd shoot," Doc grinned. "If I made you, and with all of them cheering you on, you had to."

Until he said that, I'd had the sick feeling Doc had acted a lot saner than I. But a man who's been shot — even a dirty flesh wound like that—doesn't beam. Maybe he

gives you a sickly grin, acting brave. Doc was grinning ear-to-ear, feeling no pain, and that's not normal.

Doc pointed up. "Jeb," he said, "a couple of friends of mine are a few feet over your head in a machine, healing my arm. They're a little different, but there's nothing miraculous about them. They're very loyal to a friend in trouble. They're *people*, too."

Doc took off his coat, and he rolled up his sleeve and flexed his wounded arm and wiped off the drying blood. I saw two small puckered scars where the bullet had ripped in and out. I looked at the pool of blood on the ground, on his coat, his shirt sleeve.

So did everybody else. And Doc went around like a cocky teenage boy, showing off his arm muscle.

There must have been a good sixty people round now, whispering like they were in church. Staring at Doc's arm, then at the blood, on him, on the ground. Staring up into the empty blue sky. They started backing away, slowly, quietly, the way hounds might when a wounded big cat suddenly shows life. But they had their ears cocked.

Doc stood there, looking at them. He gave a big sigh and squared his shoulders and he used



his eyes, as if he were memorizing every blessed inch of Belleville a man could ever see from there, the buildings, trees, streets, the old dirt road, even my dog.

"Come over here," he said. He sort of groped in the air shoulder-high, and then grasped something that wasn't there.

I came over.

"Jeb," he said. "I made a mistake. I should never have come back. It's nice. I loved it when I was a boy. But I'm wrong here." He pointed up. "I should have stayed at the university after Martha died. My friends, up there, would have found me anyway. But I felt so badly about Exiter that I had to come back and do this. You know what I mean?"

I nodded.

"Then come over here and feel this. Where my hand is."

I did. I felt it.

"The little surgical instrument," Doc said. "You know what the government would do with it."

I handed it back. I saw it bulge the material in his coat pocket.

"You'd better do something about Razz' tail," he said. "And I'm sorry about the gas pump."

"That's easy fixed," I said.

"Shake hands?" he said.

We did, till tears came in his eyes.

Then he handed me back my warrant.

"If anybody in town ever sees that crazy Doc Janney again, be sure to have him locked up, will you, Jeb?"

"Sure," I said.

He squared his shoulders and said, "Well, time to go."

We didn't see any ladder, or any space ship. But we saw him go up the ladder—the one I'd felt—and we saw a circular door open, and we did see him go inside and close that door. And that's all we saw or heard.

Sure, the people here talked it over, still do, always will.

But if it gets outside and any stranger comes asking, he'll be wasting his time, even if small-townners do love to talk.

Because we remember why Doc Janney was locked up, and who helped lock him with talk.

And the folks here in Belleville aren't that crazy.

THE END

