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THE FADING GHOST

By WILLIS KNAPP JONES

Author of "The Green Scarab" and "Bright Eyes of Adventure"

THE stranger entered my office and dropped wearily into a chair, covering his face with his hands. "I'm dead, doctor," he groaned.

I agreed that it was quite a climb from the street to my office. "But soon—a month or so—I expect to move to the ground floor."

"That will be too late. It won't do me any good, then."

"No? What's your trouble?"

He stared straight at me as he answered. "Trouble? I have none. Dead people have no troubles, and I've been dead for half an hour. I committed suicide."

I looked at him, startled. He was rather pale, I noticed, and the brilliant red necktie which he was wearing gave the impression of a deep and bleeding wound. He seemed very nervous, his hands continually stroking the creased trousers of the light gray suit he was wearing.

"I committed suicide," he repeated. "I shot myself through my heart." He indicated the spot with a long, slender finger, on one knuckle of which I saw just such a stain as dried blood makes. I thought he meant for me to examine him, so I arose, and took a step toward him. He motioned me back. "Don't touch me," he commanded. "It's no use. You couldn't feel me. I wonder whether you can even see me plainly. I'm getting more ethereal all the time. I—what was I saying?"

"That I couldn't see you. But I can, plainly."

"Oh, my clothes, perhaps, my coat, my necktie—"

Yes, that red necktie was very much in evidence. I agreed, wondering whether he were insane.

He seemed to read my mind. "You think I'm crazy, don't you, doctor? But I'm not. My nerves are frazzled, and I thought I would go insane when Polly turned me down; but I didn't. I know I didn't. I've had my knee tapped and have had all sorts of tests. Finally, I couldn't stand the agony and made an end of myself this afternoon." He looked up at the clock. "Just twenty-eight minutes ago my soul left my body."

I studied him carefully. His eyes had none of that stare peculiar to the insane. I was near enough to be sure that he was not intoxicated; yet I could not determine just what ailed him. Perhaps, if he talked longer, he would help me to diagnose his condition. "Tell me about it," I urged.

"I knew you'd be interested. The day I read your book, *Do the Dead Survive?* I said to myself, 'I wonder whether he ever saw a ghost.' Then, just before I snatched up my revolver, I looked up your office in the telephone book so that if I did live after death I could come to call on you and tell you how correct your assumptions were. And after the shot, and I felt myself growing more aerial and ghostlike, I left my body lying dead on the floor and hurried here to

speak to you before I became entirely invisible. Your book, page 147, speaks of the process. You called it 'fading', if you will remember."

I was becoming more and more confused. He sounded far from rational. I knew that I was not dreaming and that this could not be a practical joke. I had never seen the fellow before. Yet there was no apparent solution. As hackwork, I had written a book on spiritualism, voicing my belief that death was not the end of everything; but I had never expected to have a ghost come to my consulting room in the middle of the afternoon to prove it to me.

"You are sure you were dead?" I asked inanely.

I had to repeat my question before he came out of the sort of stupor into which he had fallen. Then he jerked himself together. "Absolutely sure. I stood before a mirror like that one." He pointed to a full-length mirror beside my instrument cabinet. "Oh, those knives are so glittering! Do you think I made a mistake in using a revolver? Would poison have been easier?"

"Well, I'm not an authority on suicide," I had to confess.

"Still, the shot did not hurt. I didn't feel any pain at all, just the explosion and a momentary vibration. I—where was I?"

"Standing before a mirror," I prompted.

"Yes, I'd been having worries—love, you know; couldn't sleep at night, and all. When the thought of suicide came, I took my revolver from my bureau drawer, pressed it close to my heart, and without waiting a second, pulled the trigger and fell dead on the floor. Then I left myself lying there, and came here. Nobody seemed to notice me along the street. Perhaps they couldn't see me. Can you?"

I nodded. "But you said you were lying on the floor?"

"Yes. I looked back to make sure just before I closed the door. Remembering your warning on page 343 against retention of psychic visions, I tested myself carefully. But I know my body is there. This is my astral self. It was a terrifying sight, blood trickling from the wound." He suddenly became conscious of the stain on his knuckle. He raised his right hand as if to wipe the mark away, thought better of it, and dropped his hand. "Terrifying sight," he repeated.

"It must have been. You're the first astral body I've ever seen. Is there anything unusual about your earthly body?"

"I didn't stop to see. But would you care to go and look?"

"Yes, indeed."

"I had hoped you would." He gave me the address. But he refused to accompany me. "I'll stay here," he promised. "I may not last till you get back. I'm fading fast. But if I'm entirely a ghost when you return, I'll—I'll move that paper." He pointed to a temperaturegraph hanging partly over the edge of my desk. "But hurry."

"I'll be back in an hour," I promised.

I was better than my word. Forty minutes later I puffed up the stairs. He was still there, lost in thought.

"Did you find me?" he asked immediately.

"Yes, just as you said, lying beside the bureau with a bullet in your heart. But I don't understand one thing."

"How I came here? That was because I was materialized, embodied. Chapter seven of your book was entirely right in its assertions."

"No, that's not it. I'm interested in that, of course, and I'd appreciate it if you would take off your shirt and let me see whether materialized

ghosts have the wounds of the original body. I'll confess I'm confused. I've just realized something that completely upsets my theory."

He had been about to remove his coat, but he stopped. "What is that, doctor?" he asked.

"The fact that, although you are wearing a red necktie, your earthly body, exactly like you in every other respect, wears a modest black one."

He gave a shriek of agony, and jumped up, horror depicted on his countenance.

"No, doctor, don't tell me that the body was wearing black!"

"Yes, indeed. Same color gray suit, and shirt, but a black necktie."

He sank his face in his hands and I heard a heartbroken moan. "Oh, I see it all. What a villain I am! It's all the fault of this nervous trouble I've been having. I'm not a suicide, then; I'm a fratricide. I lived with my twin brother, and we dressed exactly alike except that he did not share my love for pretty ties. I've shot my brother instead of myself!"