

DETECTIVE

FICTION

WEEKLY

Formerly Flynn's



Creepy Novelettes by

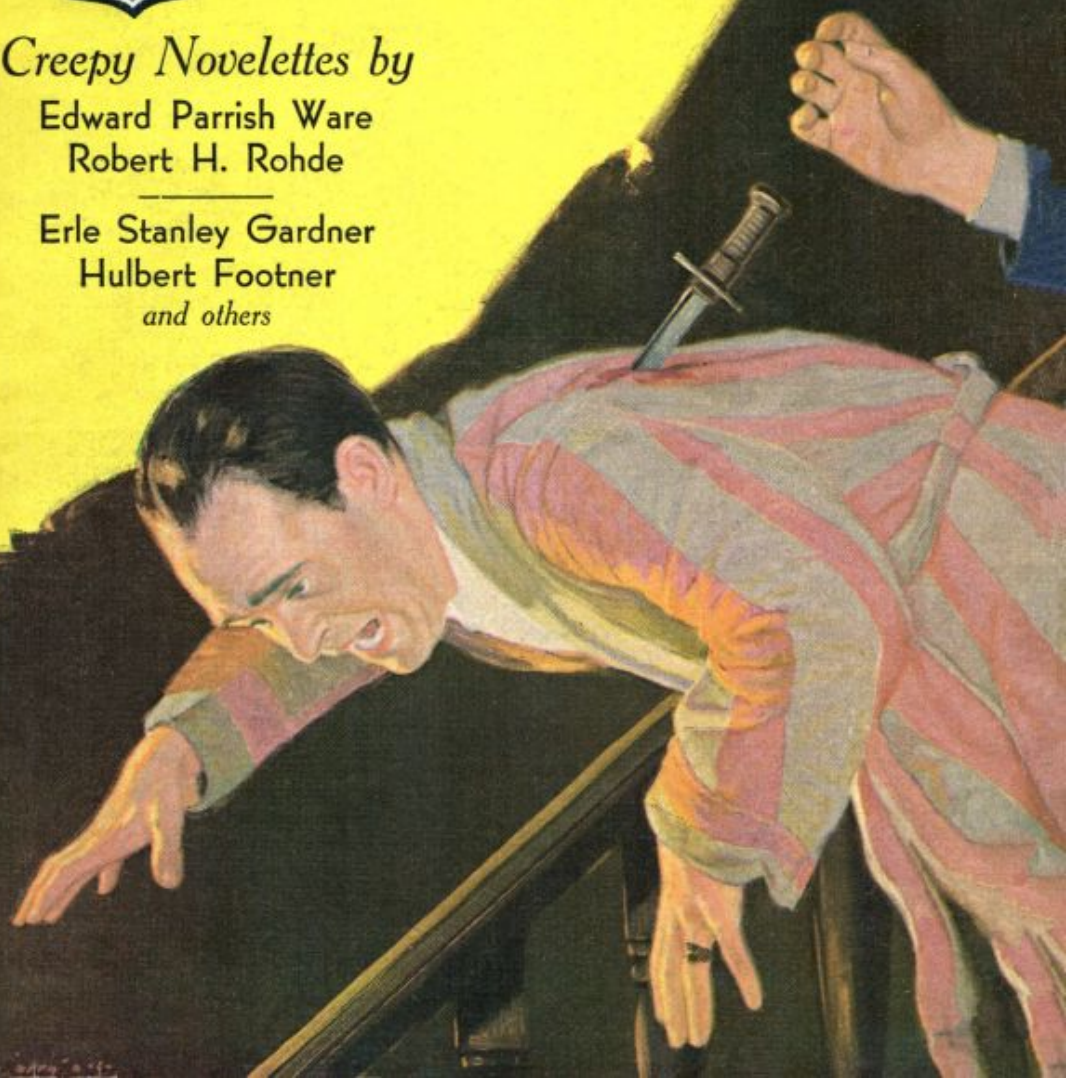
Edward Parrish Ware

Robert H. Rohde

Erle Stanley Gardner

Hulbert Footner

and others



*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Murder Key

Date of first publication: 1932

Author: Ray Cummings (1887-1957)

Date first posted: Dec. 24, 2021

Date last updated: Dec. 24, 2021

Faded Page eBook #20211255

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

The Murder Key

By
Ray Cummings

First published *Detective Fiction Weekly*, July 16, 1932.

It Was the Key to a Dead Man's Door Fox Held—and It Would Be the Key to a Murder unless He Got Rid of It Quickly



The key hurtled through the air

It was raining this dreary March afternoon when from the summit of the hill Ronny Fox looked down upon the sodden gray walls of the great prison. The sight of the huge quadrangle with its sentinel towers made him shiver. This was the place he had so narrowly avoided.

Ronny was tense and grim as he halted his taxi and sat for a moment, gazing. He had waited two years for this afternoon when Jennings was coming out of the prison, released, square with the law. But he wasn't square with Ronny! That was still to come.

"Go on down," he told his taxi driver. "Near the front gate—I want to see a fellow come out." He handed the man a five dollar bill. "Want to see without being seen, get me? He'll be taking the four-eighteen to the city, I guess."

It was now about half-past three. It hadn't been hard for Ronny to get the information that Jennings was coming out about this time. And Jennings knew nothing of Ronny's movements—probably had forgotten all about him by now.

With his cap pulled low over his eyes, Ronny's slim figure lounged in the back of the taxi, hidden behind its rain-splattered windows. His hand in the side pocket of his coat caressed the cool, sleek revolver.

There was a taxi waiting close by the gate and presently Jennings came out. No friend was here to greet him. What the hell—Jennings had no friends left. He looked, as he stood shaking hands with the prison official, just about as he had always looked. Flabby and paunchy. A little pale from the prison life.

The gate clanged open, and then closed. Jennings climbed into his taxi and it started for the hill.

"After it," Ronny murmured. "Keep it in sight."

This was a visiting hour. Ronny's taxi had attracted no attention; there were many other cars waiting here. Easy enough to stay on the trail. Jennings wouldn't be suspicious . . . In the railroad station Ronny was close enough to see Jennings buy a ticket for New York.

The McIlroy House wasn't much of a hotel; yet hardly a dump either. Ronny was close enough to hear the number of the room which Jennings had gotten. 332. He saw the big, old-fashioned key with its large oval metal tab bearing the name and address of the hotel on one side, and the room number on the other. Ronny could almost read the number as the clerk tossed out the key and the colored boy picked it up. But he didn't have to read it, for the clerk called out the number. And now he was writing it after Jennings' name in the hotel registry book.

Ronny lounged around for nearly an hour. No hurry. No need to watch Jennings' movements any longer. Jennings had followed the colored boy upstairs. The hotel had no elevator; apparently just these front stairs which came down within sight of the desk. That was all right. Ronny had no intention of making any hurried getaway. When he left he would check out openly. There would be nothing to connect him with the crime. It wouldn't even be considered a crime; an accident, probably, the way Ronny would fix it up. There were only men in this hotel, most of them transients, plenty coming and going all the time. Nobody would ever notice Ronny. He wondered if a hotel like this would have a house detective. Probably would, but Ronny couldn't spot him.

And this hotel, which Jennings had selected for his first night of freedom, had a Police Station immediately across the street. Ronny had chuckled at that. Fair enough! Jennings' first night of freedom. It would be his last night—for anything . . .

Ronny came out of his wandering thoughts and saw that it was after seven o'clock. He was hungry. Time to get a room here. And Jennings might be coming down any minute to go out to eat. It wouldn't be a good plan to encounter him here in the brightness of the lobby.

Ronny verified, as he signed the name John Green in the registry book, that Jennings had been given room 332. That would probably be on the third floor. What he wanted was a room on that floor, or above—preferably above. Far enough away so that no one would think of him, even as a witness.

"Don't care much, except the price, what you give me," he told the clerk.

Luck was with him. He didn't have to stall, or raise any objections. He got a room on the fourth floor, which was the top. And he saw, as he climbed the stairs, following the colored boy who carried his small suitcase, that Jennings' room on the third floor, was close to the stairs. Easy to spot it by the big metal numbers tacked to its door-panel. The old-fashioned glass transom over the door showed a glow of light. What luck! It was necessary to pass Jennings' room to get further upstairs. That gave Ronny a perfect excuse for being in this part of the hotel if by any chance he should be seen here.

Ronny went out once or twice, and then waited in his own room, reading, until nearly midnight. Jennings had been out to supper, had come back and perhaps now had gone to bed. Ronny slipped the bottle of whiskey into his side coat pocket and his revolver in the other. He drew his cap low over his eyes, put out the light in his room and locked his door as he left. He was wearing on his right hand a thin black silk glove to guard against leaving fingerprints. He kept this hand in his right coat pocket, gripping the revolver.

No need for particular secrecy; if anyone happened to be in sight when he got down to the third floor he would keep on going. But no one was in sight. The stairs and the hall were empty. The transom over Jennings' door still showed an interior light. Jennings probably was awake.

Ronny paused at the turn of the stairs for a moment. The long hall was dim, with only an occasional small electric bulb illumined. A red glow at the further end marked the fire exit. Near the stairs a hall side-window, partly opened, looked out over an angle of the adjacent alley. Easy to walk quietly—there was a strip of carpet down the center of the hall. But the place was comfortably noisy anyway. The roar of the clattering city came in that opened hall window. Some of the room-transoms showed lights; twenty feet down the hall it sounded as though a card game were in progress. Noisy, raucous voices; laughter; the clatter of poker chips.

Ronny decided that now was as good a time as any to chance it. A few seconds getting into Jennings' room without being seen; and a few seconds unobserved when he came out. That was all he needed.

II

He stood at Jennings' door . . . Have to remember to close this transom. Jennings would make a little rumpus, of course . . . Ronny tapped on the door very softly. No answer. Very carefully, with his gloved hand, he turned the knob. The door yielded. Jennings hadn't locked it.

A second and Ronny was in the room, with the door softly closed behind him. And Jennings' startled voice was saying,

"What you want? Oh—"

Ronny's swift gaze in that second took in all the details of the fair-sized bedroom. No bath. Only this one hall door. Two windows with drawn down shades. Bureau, washstand, chairs and table. Matting rug of straw on the floor. Small electrolier, lighted; Jennings had evidently shifted it from the table to a chair beside the bed. And Jennings, in pajamas, propped up on the bed, with newspapers on his knees.

A second, while Ronny stood backed against the closed door and Jennings gazed with startled surprise. He didn't recognize the intruder, of course. Ronny's cap was pulled low down; it was dim here by the door, out of the yellow circle of the electrolier's illumination. But that yellow circle fell upon Jennings' flabby face. It went pale. The jaw dropped with astonishment, then with fear as Ronny's black-gloved hand whipped out with the revolver.

And Ronny's low voice hissed, "Keep quiet! One shout—or move—and you'll be dead. I mean it. One move's your last."

Ronny's left hand was fumbling behind him for the transom-lever. He found it and shoved the thing closed. The big key was in the lock. Ronny turned it and locked the door. He saw the fear on Jennings' face mingled now with a vague relief. Jennings thought this was an ordinary stick-up. His eyes swung wildly about the room as though for help. But he did not move.

"What you—"

"Shut up!" hissed Ronny.

"What you—I—I have no money here." Jennings spoke with obedient softness. "Don't shoot. I'll give you—give you what I've got."

Then as Ronny shoved back his cap, Jennings knew him.

"You!"

There was fear on his face now. Stark terror. Triumph surged over Ronny. This was the moment for which he had been waiting two years.

"Yeah. Know me, don't you?" Ronny padded forward to the foot of the bed. "Keep your hands up there on your knees."

"I haven't—haven't got—"

"Well, keep 'em up, anyway." He shifted along the side of the bed and sat down on it close by Jennings, who drew back in terror against the pillows.

"Ronny—that gun—what you want? Are you crazy?"

He was squirming with terror.

"Keep your voice soft, damn you, Jennings. I'll—"

"I am keeping it soft, Ronny. I'm glad—"

“Glad, are you? Well, you won’t be in a minute. Thought you’d double-cross me, did you?”

“Ronny, no—”

“Just because you got caught—an’ I didn’t—tryin’ to put ’em after me—”

“No! I swear I didn’t, Ronny; listen—” He was terrified, squirming. Ronny sat with leveled weapon. Gloating. This was worth waiting for.

“Go ahead,” he urged. “Tell it. Let’s hear it—gettin’ off with two years—”

“Because they knew I wasn’t the one who tried to kill her.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Jennings dared to mock him. He dared to show a little spirit. Ronny, with narrowed eyes saw that Jennings was tensed, watchful.

“Ronny, if I’d told them about you—you know damn well I saw you stab her. An’ suppose she’d died—we didn’t plan murder—I didn’t—”

“You’re a liar.”

“I’m not, Ronny. I could have told, but I didn’t. I could tell now—”

Tell now! But that’s just what he couldn’t do! Ronny saw with a sudden vision like a light striking into darkness how futile and unimportant had been all his plans for vengeance. This was his real motive. Jennings knew what really had happened that night in the lonely cabin; he could send Ronny up for it any time he liked.

“Ronny, I’ve learned my lesson. I’m going straight—”

“Straight? Straight to hell!”

There was an instant when Jennings must have seen his death coming. The knowledge of it swept into his eyes. His tensed body hardly moved as Ronny suddenly struck with the revolver muzzle which he had been holding within a foot of Jennings’ face. It caught Jennings on the temple. He did not cry out. He made hardly a sound as his body pitched forward, tumbled sidewise and slid through Ronny’s outstretched arms to the floor. The electrolier went down; the light in the room went out.

Ronny straightened and stood panting. This was not just what he had expected should happen, but it was good enough. Jennings was dead. Or was he? This damn room-light being extinguished, would that attract attention from the hall? Had there been too much noise?

Ronny was startled by the confusion of his whirling thoughts. There seemed a dozen things that he had to do all at once, and above them all was a great urge to get out of here. People might come, begin pounding on the door. Through that door was the only way to get out. He’d be caught in here like a rat in a trap.

Ronny stood fighting his rising panic. No one would come—there hadn’t been much noise. He saw now that there was still light enough in the room for what he had to do. The hall light came through the glass of the transom, and a yellow glow of nearby electric signs showed through the drawn window shades. And in a moment Ronny’s eyes were accustomed to the new dimness.

The pajama-clad body of Jennings lay with outstretched arms on the floor. One cheek was against the matting. From the upturned temple blood was welling, darkly red on the pallor of the face. The electrolier lay near the bed. Ronny saw that in falling one of Jennings’ legs had struck against the dangling wire and had ripped the wire completely out of the electrolier so that the two copper ends of the wire now lay on the matting. The paper-shade electrolier hadn’t made much noise as it fell. It wasn’t broken; the bulb was still intact. The ripping out of the wires was what had extinguished the light.

Ronny's thoughts steadied. Could he make this look like an accident? A drunken man, getting out of bed, tripping over a light wire, pitching forward and sidewise, striking his temple against something sharp? Worth taking a little time to fix. Ronny figured that if anyone had heard any noise, and wanted to investigate, they'd have come already. He would chance a minute or two.

III

He padded softly to the windows, cautiously pulled the shades aside an inch or so. A sheer drop to the street. Both windows were closed and locked. He did not touch them. Was Jennings dead? Ronny gripped his revolver around its middle with his gloved hand and stabbed the muzzle again into the red wound of Jennings' head. Grewsome business. It made Ronny's senses reel, so that he leaned back against the bed to steady himself.

Jennings was dead; no doubt of it now. Ronny took off his black glove carefully. He wiped the bloody revolver muzzle with the glove and laid the weapon and the glove on the floor . . . Mustn't forget to take them with him, and find a place outside to dispose of them. The blood on the glove would dry in a moment, and then he could safely put it in his pocket.

So much for him to guard against! He had left no fingerprints yet. He was sure of it. Was any blood on his clothes? He stood in the yellow glow of one of the window shades, examining his appearance. Nothing wrong. In the bureau mirror, as he turned back to the dim, eerie room, he caught a glimpse of his reflection—slim fellow with gray cap awry on his head. His white face was contorted, strained. God, what a way to look! Was he so frightened?

He faced the mirror, straightened his cap. Nothing wrong. And he smiled into the ghastly reflection of his face. Why all this excitement? He had no expectation of facing the police; there would be no way for him to be drawn into this thing at all. But he mustn't linger here. Must fix the body to look like an accident.

The bed was of iron, painted white, with brass trimmings. Brass balls ornamented its corner posts. The two at the foot of the bed were much lower than those at the head. Ronny stood by the outside foot-corner and with the tail of his jacket he unscrewed the brass ball. It came loose, exposing the threaded iron staple. It was just about the size and shape of the end of a revolver muzzle. This was what the dead man would be supposed to have struck . . . It would need blood on it.

Ronny had the brass ball clutched in the flare of his jacket. What should he do with it? He knelt, dropped it to the floor, kicked it gently with his foot. It rolled under the bed, struck one of Jennings' shoes and lay motionless. Ronny took a look and left it there.

With the black glove dipped into that grewsome temple of the dead man, he smeared blood upon the point of the bed-post, and put the glove back on the floor with the revolver . . . Mustn't forget to take them with him.

A haste was on Ronny now. It seemed that he had been here an interminable time since the killing, but in reality it had only been a minute or two. The body wasn't lying in the right position. He gripped it under the shoulders and hitched it nearer the foot of the bed. Careful of the blood! Had blood gotten to the floor matting in the other position? He saw that it had not.

He wiped his whiskey bottle with his jacket to avoid fingerprints. He put a little whiskey on Jennings' lips, spilled more on the floor and some into a glass which stood on the table. And then he laid the bottle on the floor with its neck against the fingers of Jennings' outstretched right hand. The whiskey gurgled out on the matting for a moment and then stopped.

Ronny was finished. He stood surveying the grewsome, tragic scene of the dim bedroom. A drunk fell out of bed and killed himself. Fair enough. Much better than an unsolved murder; with a hue and cry after everybody who ever knew Jennings . . .

Now to get out of this damned room . . . Ronny abruptly stiffened. He crouched back against the foot of the bed with all the blood in his body seeming to have turned into ice water. Voices and footsteps sounded in the hall! Men coming! God! He was caught here red-handed, caught like a rat in a trap! The door was locked on the inside—Ronny remembered distinctly that he locked it. But the men would try the door. Pound. Shout. Alarm the hotel.

A panic of terrified, unreasoning thoughts swept Ronny as he crouched in the yellow dimness, holding his breath, listening to the approaching men. A few seconds. Where was his damned gun? Must get it. Fight his way out of here. Fight—never get taken—this—this was premeditated murder . . . Death penalty . . .

The footsteps came to the door—Ronny suddenly breathed again and felt himself smiling weakly. He was trembling and cold all over—cold with sweat. But safe. The footsteps had not stopped. The voices were nothing but casual talk. Just a couple of men passing on their way upstairs.

What a fright over nothing! The sounds were gone in a moment. Silence out there now. He wiped his dank forehead with the back of his hand and tried to grin. This accursed room—the body lying there weltering—once away from here, this feeling of being in a trap would vanish. Now was the time to get out.

He stood listening at the door. Silence. No, he could dimly hear that card-game down the hall. He turned the key quietly in the lock. Had he better open the transom? Why bother? What an idiot! Of course he had to open the transom, in order to toss Jennings' key back in! He was sure he could toss it so it would land on the bed. A drunk was liable to do anything. The police could figure that this drunk had locked himself in and taken the key to bed with him. Ronny fought to keep his mind on what he was doing. So many things, all of which must be done just right. He gently opened the transom. Its glass panel tilted inward from the top six or eight inches. O. K. He took the key from the lock. Careful of fingerprints on the doorknob—and on the key. Big metal tab, easy to put fingerprints on it. He dropped the key in his jacket pocket and wiped it off with the cloth of the pocket.

He turned the doorknob with the tail of his jacket. Silence outside. But in that second of hesitation it seemed to Ronny that he dared not chance going out. Was someone lurking silently out there, ready to jump on him? Nonsense!

Then another wave of terror swept him. He was going out, leaving his revolver and the bloody glove here on the floor! He turned back and found them. The blood on the glove was only damp now. He stuffed them in his pocket, opened the door an inch. Silence—

He was in the hall. He closed the door without touching the knob. There was just a little faint click, and another as he turned the key in the lock and withdrew the key. And they were both drowned in a burst of laughter from that room at the end of the hall.

Safe! The damned thing was over. But was it? Footsteps sounded. Someone coming up the nearby uncarpeted stairs! And he had the key in his pocket—the key to the murder, unless he got rid of it in a hurry!

Ronny fled from the door. He reached the stairs, silently mounted a few steps and drew back in the shadows of the mid-landing. He was really safe now! If this fellow came past the third floor Ronny could go on up to his own room . . . The footsteps reached the third floor and went along the hall and away into silence. Ronny breathed again. This sort of thing was easy. He went back down the few steps to the third floor. The hall was empty. He saw the opened hall window. The alley below was piled with a litter of rubbish; Ronny had noticed it

earlier in the evening. A good place to throw the revolver and glove. They might not be found for days . . .

It only took him a second or two to reach the locked door of Jennings' room and get rid of the key. He held it gingerly by the end, drew back from the door and threw it through the opened transom. It would drop on the bed—now he must throw the revolver and glove out of this hall window . . . God! Was it possible to see through the transom of Jennings' room from the upper stair landing? The realization of such a possibility—someone having been on the stairs and seeing the murder—flashed with a vagrant stab of thought into Ronny's mind in that split second while the dead man's key was hurtling through the air in Jennings' room . . .

The key struck in the room—but not on the bed. Ronny heard the faint rattling clank of metal. It had hit something hard. But what had it hit?

What was this? The hall went dark. Blackness. Had he gone suddenly blind?

IV

Ronny fought, in a panic with flailing hands, at the blackness. It drowned him. He turned in it, vaguely with his sense of direction gone. Blind? Rot! He was all right. Easy! Find the stairs! Get away from here! Away—

All the lights in this part of the hotel were extinguished. The hall, and all these rooms, had gone suddenly dark. Voices were rising; footsteps; a clatter; doors opening; people groping into the hall.

Ronny tried to hold his wits. He heard the rattle of poker-chips. The card-game! To the left! He turned and started; he felt the strip of hall carpet under his feet. Other men were in the hall. A match flared briefly, to show a man in a bedroom doorway.

Then Ronny saw the glow of light in the hall window. The gun in his jacket pocket thumped his hip as he moved. Must get rid of it—and the bloody glove. Throw them out the window . . .

He reached the window and felt somebody beside him; they bumped. Hands gripped him. Ronny's heart was in his throat. He still had this damned gun and bloody glove.

A voice demanded, "Shay, got a match? 'Scuse me—hittin' you—damn dark."

Ronny shook him off. "No, I haven't."

Spots of yellow light were appearing in the hall. Voices were demanding that somebody find the stairs and go down and get the damned hotel clerk. Then suddenly from the card-game came the sound of a table overturning. A crash of bottles and glasses and chips. And a loud drunken wail.

The fellow beside Ronny clung again. "No match? Stew bad. Gotta get a can'le. Stew damn dark'n my room."

This accursed bloody glove! Was he doomed to be caught with it? Would the electric lights flash on?

Ronny twisted sidewise at the window. He was still in shadow. In another second he had the gun and glove out of his pocket—and dropped them over the sill. Or on the sill? No, they fell down into the alley. No doubt of that. Down into a big pile of rubbish. He could see it down there.

What a relief! Ronny stood with the drunk clinging to him. The glove had been moist with blood; Ronny could feel it sticky on his fingers. He spat on them, wiped them off on the leg of his trousers.

"Let go of me, you idiot." He shoved away the drunk. Everything was all right now. He was just another bystander. He turned and saw that he was only a few feet from the stairs. He could say—if anybody bothered to ask—that he had just come down the stairs from his room and was on his way out of the hotel. He was wearing his cap; it would be perfectly plausible.

He started for the stairs and met the beam of a white flashlight—the house detective coming up on a run, with the night clerk after him.

"What the hell's all the rumpus here? Who put out the lights? What was that crash?"

Somebody said, "Lights went out, all at once. Guess a fuse blew out."

The group gathered solid at the stair-head. Ronny couldn't see how to get past them without attracting attention.

“Clerk, I say, get your electrician.”

“Lad’s right. Ain’t this damned hotel got any ’lectrician? We’re in a game—can’t play poker in a dark—”

Three uniformed figures came up the stairs with a rush. The police from across the street!

“Hey, Greggson, you here? Need any help? What’s the trouble?”

The hotel detective swung around. “Damned if I know, Bill. Fuse blew out—that’s about all.”

Ronny’s breath stopped. He stood against the wall of the hall, frozen, transfixed. Somebody had said:

“From that room—over there, 332.”

Greggson’s flashlight beam swung to Jennings’ door, and clung.

The man added, “Seemed like I saw a splutterin’—a flickerin’ light over that transom—”

A little momentary flickering glow had been visible through Jennings’ transom after the lights went out. And there was a smell of something burning. It was faint, but even now everyone in the hall was aware of it.

“From in there!”

“A short circuit—”

“Who’s in there? Is it occupied—”

Greggson was at Jennings’ door. He tried it. Found it locked. Began pounding. And shouting:

“Hey, you, in there! Wake up!”

“Drunk, maybe—”

One of the policemen stooped at the keyhole.

“No key in here.”

The clerk was saying, “I rented it. I was on when he registered. Man named Jennings. He came in to go to bed coupla hours ago.”

Ronny stared, fascinated. But his thoughts were saying, “Get away from here. Away—”

He took a step. A policeman was at the stairs. No chance! No innocent bystander would leave now. It would look suspicious, draw attention . . .

“George, get the pass-keys.”

The pale-green colored boy rolled the whites of his eyes and dashed down the stairs. In a minute he was back. They opened Jennings’ door. The flashlight beams swept in.

“God! Look at ’im!”

“Dead? Is he—”

“Dead drunk, you mean.”

“Dead, you damn fool. Look at his head.”

“Lord, Greggson, look at this! Easy, man! Don’t touch it!”

“The fuse blew—no current now to—”

“Well, don’t touch it anyway. Get the sergeant. An accident? How do you know what this is? Hey, you fellows, keep back out of here—”

“Get a doctor, somebody. He might not be dead—”

Ronny was in the group that crowded forward to stare into the room. Queer mischance, caused by his tossing the dead man’s key through the transom! The key had fallen, not upon the bed, but on the floor. It had slid and landed on the naked ends of the ripped-out electrolier wires! The key and its metal tag had short-circuited the current, caused that momentary blue

flickering, and then blown the fuse. The straw matting under the key was charred a little. It had smoked for a while and then stopped of itself.

Weird mischance that by tossing the key he had brought this sudden discovery of the crime. But what of it? No danger to Ronny. And they could see that all this was only an accident anyway.

Ronny was herded back with the others from the door. Nothing to do now but stand here and act natural; watching with natural curiosity what was going on . . .

Time passed. Other officials came. Inside Jennings' room they tramped about and whispered. The door closed. Then later it opened again.

Out in the hall the bystanders stood in little groups, excitedly talking, gathering what they could from what snatches came from Jennings' room. Not a person had made a move to leave the scene; more had tried to arrive, but the policeman on guard at the stairs stopped them.

"—an' what the hell," Ronny was saying to the group which he had joined. "I was on my way out from upstairs. Gonna keep us here all night because a drunk fell an' killed himself?"

"—sayin' now it might be murder! The clerk jus' said—"

Might be murder! Ronny stiffened. He mumbled, "Jees—this is the real thing, huh?"

Fragments of information came trickling into the hall. Looked like murder. The body wasn't in the right position on the rug matting to have hit the bed-post . . . Somebody had shifted the body. You could tell that because the whole rug had shifted with it and was twisted under the body . . . A post mortem would tell whether Jennings really had been drunk or not . . . The clerk said that the maid certainly would have replaced that brass ball, not left it under the bed. All the rooms were in good order, always . . .

Murder? Well, what of it? Ronny had covered his tracks all right. He'd just as soon, now with all this rumpus, that they called it murder as anything else . . . He had a chance now to verify that from the hall stairs it was impossible to see down through Jennings' transom; the angle was wrong. Besides, if there had been any witness, he would have spoken up long ago . . .

The blow fell upon Ronny as unexpectedly as though someone had thrust a knife into his back. From the now open doorway of Jennings' room a policeman's voice said:

"—named John Green? Who is he? Is he here?"

And the clerk's voice: "Sure—that fellow with the gray cap over there."

The hall was bright now. It went abruptly silent, with every eye upon Ronny.

"Come here, you. Come in here."

He stumbled into Jennings' room. The door banged closed on the murmurs of the crowd in the hall.

The thick towering figure of a policeman confronted him.

"What's your name?"

"R— John Green."

God, he was frightened!

"We know this is murder, see? He's got the wound in the right-hand temple. But that's the wrong side for hittin' the bed-post an' fallin' the way he did, 'less he was a contortionist."

Ronny's thoughts were pounding. The wrong temple! Evidence of murder. What difference? It didn't say who did the murdering . . .

He was so horribly frightened! He was stammering:

"Y-yes, sir. You say—murder—"

A voice said, "Locked the door as he came out of here—then threw the key back in—"

Ronny saw the key still lying on the wires; the current was cut off now by the plug having been pulled from the base socket.

That key lying down there . . . Ronny stared, with all his wits gone and his tongue sticking in his dry mouth. Hands were plucking at his pockets.

“Here’s his own key—”

It wasn’t in his trousers pocket where he thought it was, but in the side pocket of his coat. The big policeman drew it out. Held it under Ronny’s face. But his gaze passed it, and clung to the key on the floor. The dead man’s key. But it wasn’t! Its tag bore his own room number! He could read it from here. 407. And the key the policeman had taken from Ronny’s pocket was Jennings’ key! The fatal numbers—332—dangled under his eyes.

Realization rushed upon Ronny. In that panic when he had almost been caught at Jennings’ door, he had come back from the stairs, reached instinctively into his trousers pocket, and tossed through the transom, not the dead man’s key, but his own!

[The end of *The Murder Key* by Ray Cummings]